# Awakening Angel

by Lady Bekira

Category: Ronin Warriors
Language: English
Status: In-Progress
Published: 2000-03-18 08:00:00
Updated: 2002-04-10 15:39:38
Packaged: 2016-04-27 13:28:17
Rating: M
Chapters: 13
Words: 60,985
Publisher: www.fanfiction.net
Summary: The earth is invaded by the Dynasty once again. A new ally, Shara, turns out to be much more than she orginally seems...

## 1. Prologue

### Prologue

Well, my first fanfic should be finished any day now and I'll probably be submitting it soon. But I realized I need to explain some of the background information first. So here goes.

After the final fight with Talpa, the Ronins lived out the rest of their lives happily and all of them died in their seventies. Mia and Ryo married, but never had any children. Cye and Kento married twin sisters, but had no kids. Rowen and Sage never married, and spent their lives as bachelors. Yuli grew up and married a woman named Mae and had a daughter named Elly. Lady Kayura took the Warlords away and taught them to fight for good. She also purified Anubis' Armor of Cruelty with her staff and changed it to the Armor of Light.

Years later, four months after Elly married Sanji Kamura, a martial arts expert, Lady Kayura had a premonition of terrible battles to come. She arranged for Ryo, Rowen, Kento, Cye, and Sage to be reborn. And, nine months later, they were. On the exact same day, Elly had a daughter and named her Shara.

Kayura began training them when they reached the age of seven. Yuli and Mae accessed the information Mia left behind and told the young warriors everything on the disks. Elly and Sanji would bring little Shara by to watch the boys train, and were delighted when she showed talent with a sword. She trained for awhile, but quickly turned her interests in other directions by the time she was ten.

At the age of sixteen, Sage and Shara began dating. But he was too serious about his training to let it go very far. Frustrated, Shara broke up with him a year later and concentrated on guys at her high school. She never forgot him or how much he truly meant to her.

A year later, catastrophe struck. The Dynasty had returned, led by a man named Edriss. The Ronins fought hard, but were slowly being overwhelmed by the Dynasty's forces. Yuli, Sanji, and Elly hurried to the city to help the Warriors. Shara was instructed to stay home with her grandmother Mae, but she refused to listen. When she arrived at the battlefield, Sage was lying on the hood of a car, his armor dented and blood staining his blond hair. She hurried over and tried to help stop the bleeding. He opened his eyes and reached up with his hand to touch her face. Sage realized then how much he loved her and said so. Shara started crying and said that she loved him, too.

Edriss swooped down beside them and seized Shara by the waist, hauling her up into the air. He raised his sai and pressed it to her throat. Taunting Sage, he prepared to summon his power and leave Shara lifeless. Sage cried out and rushed Edriss. Kento saw what was happening and abandoned his fight with the Dynasty soldiers to help Sage. They both fought Edriss furiously, desperate to destroy him. Shara crawled into an alley and hid.

Eventually, Ryo, Cye, and Rowen defeated all of the lesser minions and joined in the fight against the Dynasty leader. But no matter how hard they tried, the Ronins couldn't win. Sage and Kento used all the power of their armor and managed to weaken Edriss substanially, but, in the procces, destroyed themselves. The other Warriors continued the battle and triumped in the end, but the victory was bittersweet. Two Ronins had been lost, as had Yuli, Sanji, and Elly.

Shara ran to Sage's fallen form and begged him not to leave. He smiled weakly and shook his head, saying he had no choice. Turning his head to look at his friends, Sage made them vow to keep Shara safe for the rest of her life. Rowen and Ryo agreed quickly, while Cye was too busy grieving over Kento, his best friend. Looking at Shara one last time, Sage promised that his love for her would never die.

Three years have passed since that day. The Ronins have kept watch over Shara, just as they promised. Shara has grown into a lovely woman, except for her quick temper. She never fully recovered from the loss of her family and friends, but leads a fairly normal life living in her grandmother's house. Kayura has recently told the Warriors that she feels evil approaching, and they wait for the day when the Dynasty will once again return. This is when my story, Awakening Angel, begins.

## 2. Awakening Angel

Awakening Angel

> Okay, this is my first fanfic, so be kind everyone. Constructive criticism is welcomed because I'd be glad if anyone could give me some good ideas on how to become a better writer. But don't insult me for no reason. If you don't like it, explain why. <br> Couple people I need to thank. Thanks to Skyrocket and Banji4Ever for their help with some of the facts for this story.
> There. I've said what I've needed to. So here's my story.<br>
> <br>

> <br>

**Awakening Angel****
> <br>  **

The old woman shook her head in annoyance. Why must you always be so difficult? If your parents could see you now---
> But they can't, the young girl snapped. They've been dead for a long time.<br> Yes, yes, of course. But you carry a tradition---
> She cut her off again. I don't care what Grandfather wanted. I am not going to sit around in this boring old house and read all his stupid notes and records.<br> You must! she said firmly. The knowledge must be passed down, in case it is ever needed again. Yuli taught it to your mother, and now, since they are dead, I must teach it to you.
> Like I said before, I don't care! She tossed her long golden hair haughtily. That's all over with anyway. The Dynasty can never return.<br> But if it does---
> It won't! Shara shrugged into her jacket. I'm out of here.<br> She grabbed Shara's arm. I am your grandmother, darling. I only want what is best for you. Why can't you understand that?
> Her expression softened. I know, Grandma. I just . . . don't want to think about the old days. I lost too many people because of those . . . legends. Must you remind me every day?<br> Child, my intention is not to hurt you. I only want to educate you about our only hope if the the Dynasty does return. Our family holds the secret and it must never be forgotten. The Earth would be lost without them.
> Shara sighed. They're gone, Grandmother. Almost totally destroyed, remember? That's how Mom and Dad and Grandpa Yuli died. By trying to help the Warriors. What good did it do them? Two of the Warriors died in that battle. How could three win if evil did decide to return? She shook her head. I won't listen to you. I'm sorry, but I can't lose anyone else. She fled the house.<br>
> <br>
> She looked over the cool blue river and breathed a deep sigh of relief. It was so peaceful here without her grandmother's constant attempts to read Yuli and Mia's data disks to her.<br> A hand touched her shoulder gently. Are you alright?
> Hello, Cye. I'm okay, I guess. Just tired. She smiled weakly at him. Grandma keeps trying to get me to learn the legend of the Warriors. But I don't want to. I just keep think that maybe, if I don't, the Dynasty won't return and we won't lose the only Warriors left.<br> Don't worry so much about us. Ryo, Rowen, and I can take care of ourselves.
> That's what Sage and Kento said, too, and look where they are. Tears filled her eyes. I miss him so much, Cye. Why did he have to sacrifice himself? She buried her face against his shoulder and cried softly.<br> He patted her head softly. He did what he had to, Shara, to save Earth. I'm sure he would've stayed if he could, but he died trying to stop everyone from being killed. Including you. Sage loved you.
> I know. She brushed a tear away. But that doesn't make it hurt any less. In fact, it only makes it worse.<br> Shara, I--- His voice was cut off as the earth rumbled beneath their feet. What the . . . !
> No, no! she screamed. Please, God, not again! The sky turned black and lightning streaked everywhere. Another tremor knocked Shara and Cye off their feet.<br> It can't be! Cye stared in shock at the giant red and black door that formed in midair. A Gateway!
> Shara clutched his arm tightly. How can they be back? I thought you killed them all! Fear clouded her eyes and she jerked her face toward

his. You can't go! They'll kill you all!<br> He shook his head. We can't ignore it. It's our job.
> <br> A black-haired guy appeared from the bushes. See it?
> Yes, Ryo. I believe it's time to revive our powers. Cye's light blue eyes flashed with certainty.<br> He closed his eyes and shouted to the heavens, Armor of Wildfire! Tao Chi! With a brilliant flash of light, his red armor appeared, covering Ryo from head to toe. Soft pink cherry blossoms showered around him and his armor glowed with energy.
> Armor of Torrant! In an identical fashion, Cye's light blue armor appeared.<br> Another voice broke in. Armor of Strata! Rowen grinned as the dark blue armor covered his strong body. Hey, guys. Shara.
> She couldn't stop the smile from crossing her face. Good to see you again. It's been awhile.<br> He removed his helmet and ran a hand through his wild blue hair. Too long. How've you been?
> Okay. Just a little down recently. Her smile faded slightly. Thinking about Sage a lot. Especially now. A grim look replaced the grin. You can't fight them, you guys. Kento and Sage died last time. I don't want you to suffer the same fate. She held Rowen's hand between her own. Please don't do this.<br> Ryo shook his head. We don't have a choice. If we don't stop the Dynasty, they'll destroy Earth. We'd die anyway.
> <br> He's right, Shara, Rowen said to her, sadness in his midnight blue eyes. We may not win, but we still have to try.
> Then I should come. Grandmother has taught me some about fighting the Dynasty. Maybe I could help. She stepped forward and looked from Warrior to Warrior. <br> Cye took her arm. No. Go back to Mae's house and stay safe. We'll take care of this. Sage wouldn't forgive us if we let you die.
> I don't ca---<br> You're staying. Ryo's eyes were serious. Let's go, guys. The three Ronins vanished into the woods, leaving Shara alone.
> <br>
> <br> The battle wasn't going well. The Dynasty's best fighters were trying to tear the Warriors apart. If they had been complete, the Ronins could possibly win. But not now, only with three. The Earth was in serious danger of being destroyed.
> Shara stood on top of a building, watching the Warriors slowly being driven back toward a black vortex. She closed her eyes and raised her hands like Grandmother had told her to. Lady Kayura! Please, come to our aid! Defend our world against the Dynasty's evil!<br> A misty image of a slim, bluish-black haired woman formed in front of her. Shara . . . The Warlords and I are held in the castle . . . We cannot come.
> Then what can we do? Without the Ancient's power, the battle will be lost!<br> Look inside for strength. It is within you. The image went out of focus. I must leave. My energy is growing weak. Remember what I've told you. With a final encouraging smile, Lady Kayura vanished.
> Shara shook her head in dismay. What did she mean? I'm not a fighter. Never have been. She gazed over the rubble-filled city. But I guess I have to try. Turning, she hurried to street level.<br>
> <br>
> <br> Ryo, Cye, Rowen! Shara called out to them. Hang on!
> No! Stay away! Cye cried, blood soaking his light brown hair. <br> She shook her head. No way. Knocking aside a black-clad warrior, she stopped beside Cye. You need me; Lady Kayura said so.
> Rowen's eyes were wide. You spoke with Kayura?<br> Yes, I did. She sa--- Her voice cut off and a strangled gasp escaped her lips. Shara's body was rigid, her emerald eyes wide and unblinking.

> Rowen shook her shoulder. Hey, you in there?<br> Ryo knocked back four more Dynasty fighters. Guys, we better concentrate on fighting before they kill us!
> But Shara---<br> Never mind her! She'll be okay!
> Rowen glanced at her one last time. His concentration quickly swung back to the battle.<br>
> <br>
> <br> **_Concentrate. Call on the power of Halo.
> **Shara gasped at the voice. _Is . . . Is that you?
> Of course. I said I'd never leave you.<br> **Oh, Sage. I've missed you so . . .
> I know, but we can discuss that later. The guys need your help right now. Do as I said.<br> **What?
>  Call upon Halo.<br> **But that's only yours. I can't use it.
> You can now. Trust me.<br> **But---
> Trust me.<br> **Okay, Sage. But you better not vanish after the fight is over. We've got some serious talking to do later.
> His soft laughter warmed her heart. **_Of course, Shara. After the battle.
> <br>
> <br>
> **Her eyes slowly opened. She watched in dismay as Ryo and Rowen were knocked onto the edge of the vortex. Cye was lying a few feet from them, his body limp and torn. Oh, God. I better hurry. She looked up at the rolling black clouds and closed her eyes. Hope you're right.
> Rowen struggled to his feet. Get out of here! He started toward her, fighting his way through at least a dozen Dynasty soldiers.<br> Armor of Halo! she cried into the darkness. Light streaked through the clouds, causing the soldiers nearest to her to scream in pain. As the light wrapped around her, Shara seemed to glow from within with a white hot intensity. The feeling of power that surged in her was almost overwhelming. Green armor covered her slim figure and a long silver sword gleamed in her hand. She turned to look at Rowen, smiling at the look on his face.
> Rowen stopped in his tracks. Sh . . . Shara?<br> She pulled off the helmet, letting her long hair fall freely down her back. For the most part. A little bit of Sage, too.
> But how? Ryo was also staring.<br> Not too sure. But let's not talk about that now. We've got more important things to deal with. She faced the sea of Dynasty members and gulped. Much more important.
> Rowen's eyes were serious. Right. Me first. He nocked an arrow into his bow and leaped into the air. Arrow Shockwave! He released the bowstring and the arrow flew into the crowd. A wave of energy spread from where it struck, killing many of the soldiers.<br> Guess I'm next. Shara smiled. Here goes nothing. Thunderbolt Cut! Bright green light radiated from her blade and traveled outward in an arc, destroying all the of the Dynasty fighters in its path.
> Cye was struggling to his feet. I'll try . . . Super Wave Smasher! Blue bubbles of power burst from the tip of his triton. They smashed into the army and dozens fell.<br> Last as always. Ryo grinned. Alright, take this! He placed the ends of his two katanas together and twirled them through the air. Leaping upward, Ryo held them over his head and cried, Flare Up Now! Heat waves flooded the Dynasty members, causing them to writhe in agony as they died.
> Shara laughed. We did it! Her eyes sparkled as she watched the remaining soldiers run back toward the Gate.<br> Very good, Ronins. A man with gleaming violet hair appeared before them. But not good enough.

> Ryo stepped forward, his blue eyes angry. Who are you?<br> The new Emperor of the Dynasty. I'll make you pay for trying to destroy us. His eyes were dark, almost black, and shone with an eerie light. I'll succeed where Talpa and Edriss failed. He laughed and a shiver raced up Shara's spine.
> We'll see about that. Shara held her head high, openly defying him.<br> He raised on black brow questioningly. And you are . . . ?

> Shara Kamura.<br> Well, Miss Kamura, I don't know how you received the Armor of Halo, and I don't really care. All the matters is that I'm going to kill you. He flew toward them and landed beside Shara. But . . . if you swear allegiance to the Dynasty... I could spare your miserable life.
> Yeah, right, Ryo scoffed. Like that's going to happen.<br> The light in the emperor's eyes intensified. We'll see, Wildfire. Maybe you'll change your mind after you see my power.
> Then let's go. Rowen's smile widened. Give us your best shot. But Dynasty trash can never beat the Ronin Warriors!<br> 'Trash'? I'll show you trash! He lifted into the air and twirled a silver staff over his head. Darkness Typhoon!
> The Ronins screamed as the black whirlwind swept them into the sky and threw them in every direction. Ryo and Cye slammed into buildings, Rowen and Shara skidded across the asphalt, their armor giving off sparks as it scraped against the hard road.<br> You okay? Rowen gave her his hand and pulled Shara to her feet.
> She grimaced slightly. Think so. Man, that hurt! My body's not used to this kind of abuse. Her eyes widened and her breath quickened. Uh-oh. Sage is talking again. Hold up a second.<br>
> <br>
> <br> **_Ryo must use the Armor of Inferno. It's the only way to beat this guy.
> **_But doesn't that take all the Ronins' power? We're a Warrior short. Kento's still dead, remember?
> Don't forget the Warlords and Kayura. Their Armors are the same as ours. He can use them. But don't let him use you, no matter what.<br> **Why not?
> Just don't let him. I'm not sure why. It's just a feeling.<br> **Gotcha. Remember, don't you vanish on me before this is over.
> You got it, Shar. I'm not going anywhere.<br>
> <br>
> <br> **_****She looked into Rowen's dark eyes. The Armor of Inferno. It's our only hope. Ryo can use the Warlords for power, but not me. I don't know why not, but that's what Sage said.
> Ryo and Cye dashed over, out of breath. What did you say? Cye panted.<br> Sage said to use the Armor of Inferno by drawing power from Light, Venom, Illusion, and Corruption. But not from me, or the other Ronins, I guess. I don't know if you can choose who to draw from, but you've gotta try. He was very exact about that.
> Ryo nodded. Here goes. Flames glowed in his eyes and a light shone around him. Armor of Inferno! Four lights streaked from the gate overhead, each a vivid color. Ryo's red armor vanished and, in a blaze of flames, gleaming white appeared. It shone with its own light and his eyes glittered with an inner fire.<br> Shara grinned. Very cool. Err.... hot. She watched as the flames under Ryo's feet eventually vanished and turned toward the Dynasty ruler. It's over for you now! Say hello to Hariel's White Armor, the Armor of Inferno! It's strong enough to kill you and the entire Dynasty. So if you have any last words..... Better say them quick.
> He merely laughed. Foolish girl.<br> I didn't hear me say anything

funny. Shara propped her hands on her hips and glared at him. What's your problem?
> That . . . Armor, he snorted in disgust, may have been powerful enough to defeat Talpa, but it is insulting to believe it can beat me.<br> We'll see about that. Ryo, do your stuff.
> Ryo grinned. And I thought I was leader. When did you take over?<br> A sheepish look crossed her face. Sorry. Whenever you're ready, Ryo.
> Yea, ma'am, he teased. Rage of Inferno! A wave of incredible white hot flame engulfed the emperor and his remaining minions. The soldiers disintegrated before the Ronins' eyes, but the violet-haired just stood in the center of it all, eyes glowing and a mocking smile stretched across his face.<br> See? I told you, he said smugly. Your pathetic powers can never defeat me, Emperor Arcain of the Dynasty!

> Ryo stood silently, his mouth agape.<br> No way! Rowen shook his head. That's impossible!
> Cye fell to his knees and cursed under his breath.<br> Her eyes growing distant, Shara cried out with her mind to Sage.
> <br>
> <br>
> It didn't work! You said it would!<br> **I thought it would. This guy is a lot stronger than any other Dynasty member. There's no way I could've known.
> So what do we do now?
> It's up to you, Shara. You're our last hope.<br> **What? Me? But how?
> You have the power . . . A very . . . type . . . Armor . . .<br> **Sage? What's wrong? I can't hear you!
> He . . . interfering . . . Shara . . . Angel . . . Can't . . . on . . .<br> **Sage! What did you say? Sage!
> <br>
> <br>
> Welcome back.
> Shara's eyes shot open and she screamed as she found Arcain standing directly in front of her. His black eyes stared into hers and both of his hands were resting on her shoulders.<br> Get away! She shoved him backwards, trembling with fear and disgust. What do you think you were doing?
> Why, I was merely putting an end to your conversation with Halo. Couldn't let him tell you too much.<br> Ryo stood behind her. You leave Shara alone. I'll fight you and then I'll kill you.
> Arcain covered his mouth to smother a laugh. Oh, really? Strong words, Wildfire. I think I'll make you regret them. He leaped into the air, twirling his staff. Ryo followed, silver katanas flashing.<br> Rowen detransformed and squeezed both her hands between his. You okay? You're trembling.
> <br> She made her armor vanish and collapsed on the ground. I don't know. He . . . I . . . I . . . just don't know! Burying her face in her hands, Shara felt tears start sliding down her cheeks.
> Hey, hey . . . Rowen fell to his knees, his arms wrapping around her tightly. Don't do that . . .<br> She lifted her eyes to his. I can't help it. I'm . . . scared, Rowen. The Armor of Inferno couldn't stop him, and Sage . . . I think he's gone. Arcain . . . he . . . I don't know what he did, but . . . I can barely feel Sage anymore. It's like . . . I feel . . . empty. He was trying to tell me something important before Arcain interfered.
> What did he say?<br> She brushed away a tear and grew thoughtful. Something about me being our only hope. Then it gets fuzzy. Something about a type of Armor, and he called me Angel.

> Angel? Is that some kind of nickname?<br> Not that he's ever said before. Maybe---
> Ryo's voice broke through. I could use some help over here!<br> Rowen and Shara looked up just as Arcain knocked Ryo into a building.

> Stay here, Rowen commanded. Try to get a hold of Sage or Kayura, while Cye and me help fight. He called on his armor again and hurried over to Cye. Together, the two of them jumped into battle.<br> Kayura! Please come her! We need you! she shouted to the heavens. Please, Lady Kayura!
> A vague figure appeared. Shara . . . Armor . . . Angel. . . Use . . . power . . . you . . . when . . . born . . . important . . . hold . . . secret . . . power . . . yours . . . <br> Shara almost screamed in frustration. I don't understand! What are you trying to say?!
> . . . hold . . . Arcain . . . strong . . . fading . . . use . . . power . . . Angel . . . The image vanished.<br> Great. I still don't know what to do! She hit the ground with her fist.
> A foot landed on her hand. Having problems, Shara?<br> She ran her eyes up the dark orange armored leg up to the shadowed face. Who are you? How do you know my name?
> Forget so fast? He laughed.<br> A flash of light from the battle above illuminated the man's face. Dark blue hair and eyes. A familiar band tied around his head. A determined look. No way . . . Shara's voice trembled. You . . . you're . . . dead! I saw you killed!
> First lesson. Things aren't what they look like always. Kento's eyes were hard as stone. And here comes the second. His foot raised up and swung forward, catching her in the stomach. The air whooshed out of her lungs, and she flew backward over a dozen feet.<br> She winced as he pulled her head up by the hair. Kento . . . why . . .?

> You just don't get it. I work for the Dynasty now. My job is to kill you and the other . . . Ronins. His other hand smashed into her face. But you're not a real warrior, are you? Just a little girl caught in something she can't handle.<br> Shara felt a surge of pride filling her soul. Little girl? We'll see about that. Armor of Halo!

> He dropped her in shock. What the . . .<br> She pointed the blade at his throat. Can't say I blame you. After all, Sage is dead, but I somehow seem to have his armor. You must be confused.
> Oh, yeah? Well guess what. It doesn't matter. He quickly regained his composure and raised his Naginata. I'll still kill you. Kento jumped back and laughed. See if you can take this. Iron Rock Crusher!<br> The earth shook and boulders flew through the air, crashing into buildings and cars. The ground opened up and rushed toward Shara. She leaped out of the way and rolled onto the sidewalk.

> Cye landed between Shara and Kento. How . . . What are you doing here?<br> She struggled to her feet. Get . . . away . . . Cye . . . He's working for . . . the Dynasty . . . Arcain sent him to . . . kill . . . us . . .
> <br> Hey, Cye. Glad you're here, man. She just tried to kill me.

> Don't . . . listen . . . Cye . . .<br> She attacked me, man. Kento slowly approached his old friend. I came to help out, and she tried to slit my throat. She's crazy, Cye.
> But you used your power against her . . .<br> I had to defend myself. He shrugged. What was I supposed to do?
> Shara started in their direction. she accused. Ask him now he got here, Cye. Ask him!<br> His eyes darkened slightly. Yeah, Kento. Where've you been for the last three years?

> They captured me. The Dynasty. I've been a prisoner, but I heard you guys fighting and knew I had to help. So I escaped. He touched his shoulder. We've been friends for two life times now. Don't you trust me?<br> Of course I d---
> Shara pushed Kento away. Cye, how could he get out? Not even Kayura and the Warlords have been able to escape, and they're much stronger! He works for Emperor Arcain, Cye. We can't believe anything he says.<br> Cye looked at her sadly. Shara . . . are you sure?
> He said so. I'm positive.<br> Kento seemed confused. What? Cye?
> He closed his eyes. Sorry, my friend . . . Super Wave Smasher! The bubbled struck Kento in the chest, knocking him down.<br> Kento rose slowly. Well, well . . . Another traitor . . .
> Look who's talking, Shara sneered. Thunderbolt Cut! Green light flashed through the air, causing Kento to writhe in pain. She stood over him, sword poised for the final blow.<br> Cye grabbed her arm. Don't kill him. Kayura may be able to change him back.
> She lowered her weapon. Sure, Cye. Whatever you think.<br> Rowen and Ryo hit the road beside them, their armor dented and scratched. Arcain landed beside the Ronins and laughed.
> Foolish humans. Didn't I tell you that you could never win. He looked down at Kento's still form and a look of disgust twisted his features. Useless trash. I never should've saved you from dying. You've been nothing but a burden. He raised his staff in the air. It's time to rid myself of you.<br> Cye flung his body at Arcain, causing them both to skid across the road. The emperor's black robes ripped and tore.
> Arcain growled angrily as he leaped to his feet. How dare you! His bo twirled faster and faster. Time to die, Torrant! Violet light surrounded Cye and seemed to flow through his body, lighting in from the inside. A harsh cry of pain filled the air.<br> Shara kneeled by her friend. Don't give up now! I need you . . .
> He gave her a weak grin. Sorry, Shara . . . It's all . . . up to . . . you . . . I . . . believe . . . in you . . .<br> How sweet. Arcain was gazing down at her, laughter in his eyes. It's now on the little girl's shoulders. Victory is mine. Just give up now and save yourself a lot of pain.
> She rose slowly. In your dreams. I'm gonna kill you.<br> **_Sh . . . ra
> ** She gasped and stood perfectly still.
> Ar . . . r . . . f . . . An . . . el . . .<br>
> Use . . . A . . . or . . . o . . . A . . . el . . .<br> _**Realization finally hit her. Yes! I understand!
> Arcain's weapon whistled through the air and crashed into Shara's skull, buckling her knees and sending her crashing to the ground. He brought the staff down over and over, denting her armor and staining her golden hair red.<br> No . . . Shara struggled to push herself up. I . . . won't . . . give . . . up.
> Stupid girl! Just stay down and your death will come much quicker.<br> She stood before him, battered, but still proud. You'll never stop the Ronin Warriors!
> He shook his head. You're the only one left. How can you possibly hope to defeat me.<br> You'll see. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath. This is for you, guys . . . Armor of Angel! Tao Chi!
> Her armor started to glow, as did Rowen, Cye, and Kento's. Ryo's separated into the Warlords' colors, yellow, and red. The colored lights streaked toward her and combined into a golden beam. The air crackled with energy as cherry blossoms showered down. Blinded by the brightness, Arcain looked away.<br> When the light faded, Shara stood in gleaming gold armor, her helmet in her hand.
> the emperor gasped. What is that?<br> She pointed her slim blade at

him. The Armor of Angel. The power of all nine armors combined. Your worst nightmare.
> I'll still kill you! Nothing can stop the Dynasty! He swung the staff at her head furiously. She easily blocked the blow with her sword.<br> Is that all you've got? Come on, try again. She blocked him again. Block. Block. No matter how fast he attacked, Shara's blade was alway there to stop it.
> Arcain's eyes were ablaze with hatred. Die, Ronin! DIE! Twirling his bo over his head, he shouted, Darkness Typhoon! The dark wind whipped furiously around him and rushed toward Shara.<br> She held her sword parallel to her chest, bracing herself for the blow. To her surprise, when the whirlwind struck her, the sword absorbed the energy and began to glow.
> He fell back onto a car and stared. It can't be!<br> Your turn. She leaped into the sky and raised her blade high. Holy Judgement!
> Radiant energy pulsed from the sword, brightening the sky with beautiful golden light.<br> The . . . light . . . he croaked. Noooooo . . .
> It penetrated his body, causing every part of him to glow with holy light. Crying out in anguish, Arcain's body spasmed as it realized death was imminent.<br> Then he was gone.
> Shara landed on the ground and looked around at her fallen allies. Cye . . Rowen . . . Ryo . . . I'm so sorry I didn't help sooner. If I'd only understood before . . . She fell to her knees, tears shining in her eyes. Please forgive me, guys . . .<br> A soft cough.
> She scrambled over to him and pulled off his helmet. You're alive!<br> He managed a weak grin. Yeah . . . just barely. He looked toward Ryo and Rowen. Better go . . . check on . . . those two . . . I'll . . . be fine . . .
> Are you sure? He nodded. Okay. I'll be right back. Rising to her feet, Shara rushed over to check on her friends. She pulled off their helmets and pressed her fingers to each's throat, checking for a pulse. A hand clamped down on her arm and she screamed.<br> Hey . . . a voice whispered. Not so loud . . .
> She hugged him tightly. Don't you scare me like that!<br> He lowered his arm and winced. Not so rough . . . I feel like one big bruise . . . Groaning, he rolled over and looked at Ryo. Is he okay?

> Ryo's hand moved in a feeble wave. Fine . . . Never been better . . . He struggled to sit up. Shara . . . that Armor . . . how . . .<br> She smiled. I don't really understand it myself. I guess--
> Let me explain. Lady Kayura appeared above them, the Warlords at her side. She floated down to the earth, her staff shining and ringing softly.<br> Shara was born on the same day as the five Ronin Warriors. I didn't believe that had any special meaning, until I heard a voice while I was imprisoned.
> Shara frowned. Who was it?<br> Ryo suggested.
> Yes. He said that . . . other Powers had told him of a legend, never recorded here on Earth. A legend the Dynasty feared more than anything else; even more than the Armor of Inferno. She looked toward Ryo before returning her attention to the entire group. This story had faded over the millennia to the point where only a select few were aware of it. Arcain had heard it, but chose not to believe that something so powerful could exist. An Armor that could destroy even the most powerful evil force, that could wipe out not only planets, but entire galaxies.<br> Kayura touched Shara's shoulder. That is the Armor of Angel, a holy armor that can only be worn by a Chosen One. A person of true innocence and purity of heart. Shara, you almost lost this power.
> Cye's eyes were confused. <br> Never mind. Shara blushed. I know

what she's talking about. It was after Sage died, and I . . . She had to look down. I don't want to talk about it.
> Rowen nodded slowly. I understand.<br> She gazed at him sadly. Yeah. I knew you would.
> Yes, well, Kayura said, the only question is, what are you going to do with your power, Shara?<br> she hesitated briefly, fight, I guess. Protect Earth from whenever the Dynasty returns.
> Is that what you truly want?<br> Shara couldn't answer.
> Lady Kayura. Cye stood slowly. Could you heal Kento? Erase whatever spell the Dynasty placed on him.<br> Of course. She held the staff over Kento's still body and it began to glow. The golden light surrounded his body and lifted him up from the ground. With a brilliant flash, Kento appeared, standing, his armor brighter and shining.
> Hey, guys. What's happenin'?<br> Cye ran to his friend and hugged him quickly. You're okay!
> Why wouldn't I be? He looked around in confusion. Hey, where's Sage? And that Edriss guy? What is Shara wearing?<br> Cye smiled. That's a long story, my friend. Basically, the battle you remember was three years ago. Sage and Edriss are dead. We thought you were, but Arcain, the new emperor of the Dynasty, saved you and turned you against us. Shara and I stopped you, and then she called on the Armor of Angel, which is the combined power of all nine armors and what she's wearing now, and defeated Arcain. Kayura used her staff and removed the spell cast on you.
> Kento leaned against a car, shaking his head. Uh . . . yeah. Right.<br> Rowen slipped his arm around her shoulders. Are you okay?

> She sighed softly. I . . . sure. Never better. I just found out I'm the most powerful person alive! What more could I want?<br>
> Bowing her head, Shara forced a smile. Yeah. But that's impossible, right? Should move on . . . She raised her eyes to his. Rowen, you know---<br> It's okay. I know.
> She nodded. Tears gathered in her emerald eyes. I wish . . . that there was some way . . . somehow . . . for him to come back . . .<br> Shara backed away suddenly as her armor began to glow. What . . . what's happening to me? It grew brighter and brighter, until they all had to look away. The night sky was now as bright as day.
> Then she began to scream. Over and over, each cry louder than the last.<br> Rowen reached for her, but had to yank his hands back. Her armor felt as if it was on fire. Melting onto her flesh. Growing hotter and hotter until her skin peeled off in blackened flakes. He shuddered at the thought.
> Rowen! Please help me! It hurts so much!<br> Her cries pierced his heart, and he grabbed for her. Kayura stopped him.
> No. Let her be. Everything will be fine.<br> He stared at her in disbelief. How can you say that? It's killing her!
> Trust me. This is something she has to do.<br>
> <br>
> <br> Hotter and hotter it burned. Stronger and stronger the pain grew. She screamed desperately, crying out for someone, anyone to help her, to make it all end. The pain obliterated every sense, leaving nothing but the torturous feeling. There was no outside world for her. There was no _her_. No humanity to cling to, nothing to help escape. Nothing but the pain . . .
> Then came a momentary peace from it. The pain wasn't gone, it was only slightly apart. Like a void had opened.<br> Darkness. A realm devoid of light and happiness. Desolate. Alone. All alone in the dark. Humanity's greatest enemy. Couldn't think, couldn't breathe. Almost like the shadows were a physical force, crushing her body.

> Her? Yes. Her. She. I. Me.
> Shara.
> She sucked in air with a gasp. The memories destroyed by the pain came flooding back at once. She remembered a battle, Kayura, Ryo, Cye, Rowen . . .<br> Sage. His face filled her mind. Him laughing, smiling, crying, serious, hurt, brave. Every memory vivid. Every thought like a warm summer breeze to her heart. The longing she had managed to push away after he died came surging back, no longer willing to be denied.
> Is that what you truly want?<br> **She knew the answer now. _No!_ she screamed as loud as she could. _I don't want to fight anymore! All I want is him! Sage! And I want out of here!_
> A pinpoint of light appeared far away. As she kept crying out, it grew larger and larger, closer and closer. She reached for it with both hands. It wrapped around her like a blanket of warmth, shielding her body from the pain, heat, and darkness. It pulled her quickly from the void, and she felt like she was traveling through the very fabric of time and space. Then with one last flash of light, the emptiness was gone.<br>
> <br>
> <br> Shara collapsed at Rowen's feet. Kneeling, he slipped one arm beneath her neck and the other under her knees. He gently lifted Shara from the ground, her body much lighter without the armor. Rowen carried her over to where Kento stood and laid her on the hood of the car.
> Hey, is she okay? Kento looked worried.<br> Hope so. He turned to face Kayura, his dark blue eyes blazing. How could you let this happen to her! I thought you said she'd be okay!
> She will be. Do not worry, Rowen. She is much stronger than you think.<br> He angrily turned his back on her and rubbed Shara's hands softly. Wake up, Shara. You can't quit now.
> She didn't respond.<br> Come on! He banged his fist on the car. Wake up!
> Her eyelids flickered. Once. Twice. Slowly opened.<br> Ro . . . Rowen?
> He held her tightly. I thought we'd lost you . . .<br> No . . . I'm fine . . . She separated herself from him slowly and looked around. Where . . . Why . . .
> Rowen wasn't listening. Look, I know what we said that night, but, Shara, I've changed my mind. I know you love Sage, but do you think there could ever be a chance for---<br> What's that? A faint light was beginning to appear a few feet away. She slid off the car and took a hesitant step toward it. Could it . . .
> He caught her arm. No, you better stay away.<br> She wasn't paying attention. As the light grew even brighter, it drew her closer and closer until she could almost reach out and touch it . . .
> Rowen yanked her away.<br> Let me go! Shara struggled against his firm grasp. I have to!
> It suddenly exploded. Energy flowed from the light, washing over everyone and everything. Rowen and Shara fell to the ground in a tangled heap. <br> Then it was gone.
> Shara raised her head and squinted into the darkness. A lone figure was coming toward them, but it was too shadowy to see any distinguishing features.<br> Listen to me, Shara. Rowen took her hands in his. I lo---
> Oh, my God! She leaped to her feet as the person got close enough to see. Longish thick blond hair. A strong, slim body. And the most incredible, unmistakable clear blue eyes. Hey, Shar.<br> Then she was running, tears streaming down her face. Shara ran straight into his open arms and buried her face in his shoulder. She felt his arms

around her, holding her like he never wanted to let go. His soft breath ruffled her hair.
> Love you . . .<br> Sage . . . As she tilted up her face to receive his kiss, she smiled in her mind. _At last. My wish has finally come true . . .__**

**_ _**

**_ _**

3. Dangerous Mission

**Disclaimer: **I really hate these things... But I guess they must be done. Okay, I don't own the Ronin Warriors. I wish I did. Well, I wish they were real people and I owned them. That way Rowen and I could do... *laughs* Errr... never mind. Forget I said anything. Back to the point. I don't own the Ronins, but I do own Shara, Kenji, Miaka, and the currently unnamed Dynasty henchman. As soon as I figure out a cool name that means "Ice", or something, I'll give him a name. ^_^ And even though this next statement probably doesn't belong in a disclaimer, I'm going to throw it in anyway. If this is the chapter you start on (though I don't see why it would be), I strongly suggest you go back and read my prologue and the first chapter. Without those, this story isn't going to make a lot of sense... Anyway. On with the show.

**Dangerous Mission**

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Wake up! Wake up!" She opened her eyes reluctantly and found herself staring into innocent teal blue eyes.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Kenji," she murmured, sitting up slowly, "what time is it?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Ten in the morning! You're supposed to take me to training today, remember?" He jumped up and down eagerly.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Rising out of bed, she walked to her closet and opened the door. "Yes, yes, I remember, sweetieâ€¦ Go wait in the living room and we'll go right after I get dressed."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He ran over and threw his arms around her waist in a tight hug. "Thanks, Mommy! Yay! This is going to be so much fun!" Smiling brightly, Kenji skipped out of the room.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She chuckled. "In love with the fight alreadyâ€¦ just like his father." Shara closed her eyes and sighed. "Oh, Sageâ€¦ I wish you'd come home soonâ€¦" As she pulled a shirt and jeans out of the closet, Shara could feel hot tears stinging her eyes. She ran a hand over her face, wiping away the tears, and quickly dressed.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Moooooom!" She heard Kenji yell from downstairs and had to laugh.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Coming!" Shara hurried down to the living room and walked over to an antique oak weapons chest, removing her Chinese sword and Kenji's training _bokken_. She handed him the wooden sword and fastened the strap of her belt, slipping her sword into its sheath.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Hey, Mommy, do I have to learn to use a sword?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara was surprised. "Oh. Wellâ€¦ I thought you wanted to fight like me. That you had talent with a blade." She gazed at her son with wide eyes. "What do you want to learn?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Kenji chewed on his lower lip. "Umâ€¦ See, Uncle Rowen was showing me how to use a bowâ€¦ And I liked it, Mommy! I even hit the very center of the target once!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She paled slightly. "Really? We'llâ€¦ have to wait and ask your daddy when he returns. Until then, you can keep training with the _bokken_."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He pouted. "Yes, Mom. But Uncle Rowen was going to meet me at the field today so we could--"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Grabbing Kenji's arm, Shara led him out the front door. "You'll just have to tell Rowen to go home. He will not train you without your father's permission."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â They walked down the path silently, until Kenji finally spoke up. "Mom? Why don't you like Uncle Rowen?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She halted in mid-stride. "Whatâ€¦ whatever made you think that? Rowen and I areâ€¦ very good friends."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Well, Mommy, you just never let him come to our house, and never look at him or talk to him, and--"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Don't worry about it, hon. I haveâ€¦ nothing against Rowen. Nothing at all." She started walking rapidly, forcing Kenji to run so he could catch up.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â A tall figure suddenly appeared on the path ahead of them. "Don't be in such a hurry, Shara." He pointed his scythe's blade at her throat. "I have business to discuss with you."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She instantly drew her sword. "Such bad manners. Don't you know you're not supposed to threaten your business partners?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Chuckling, he took a step back. "You want to fight? Howâ€¦ brave of you. But also quite stupid." He relaxed his weapon at his side and smiled slightly. "However, it is unnecessary. Just hand over the boy, and no one will be

harmed."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara stepped in front of Kenji. "You will never touch my son. You'll have to kill me first."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Easily done." He twirled his scythe and laughed. "You no longer possess your armor. Defeating you will be simple."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "We'll see about that." She slashed at his throat, stepping nimbly to the side as she did. Deflecting that attack with the blade of his scythe, the black-haired man swept her feet out from under her with the end of the shaft. The instant she hit the ground, Shara quickly rolled to the right, barely dodging the swishing blade that impaled itself in the ground where her head had been moments before.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The man stepped back and watched as Shara leaped to her feet. "I grow weary of this battle already. You're not even a challenge, and I see no reason for me to waste any more time on you." Raising his scythe into the air, he shouted, "Icy Death Grip!" The air grew freezingly cold and a claw of ice formed in mid-air. It closed on Shara, squeezing the strength out of her body.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Mooooooommyyy!" Kenji ran toward her, swinging his weapon at the hand. "Let her go, you mean man!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He laughed loudly, stepping forward and grabbing Kenji by the arm. "Such spirit! The Dynasty will certainly be able to use you." The man waved his other hand and the claw vanished.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara collapsed on the forest floor, her vision darkening. "Kenâ€¦ jiâ€¦" As she weakly reached out toward him, the man and her son vanished. The last bit of energy left her body, and everything went black.

---

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Soft crying echoed in her ears, and she felt strong arms holding her close. Opening her eyes slowly, Shara saw wild blue hair. "Ohâ€¦ Rowenâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He pulled his head off her shoulder and gazed at her in shock. "Shara! You'reâ€¦ you're alive! I thoughtâ€¦" He held her tighter. "I thought I'd lost youâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Gently wiping a tear from his face, she smiled weakly. "Takes more than a weak Dynasty henchman to get rid of me..."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen laughed and kissed her forehead softly. "I wish I'd gotten here sooner. I was waiting for you and Kenji to arrive at the field, and when you were late, I decided-"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Kenji? No!" She pulled away from Rowen and struggled to stand. "Where is he?! That man couldn't have taken himâ€¦ He stoleâ€¦ myâ€¦ my sonâ€¦" Shara nearly fell again, but Rowen caught her.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He stroked her hair. "It's okayâ€¦ We'll gather the Ronins and get Kenji back. There's no way the Dynasty will get away with this."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "But, Rowenâ€¦ we can't defeat them! This guy was so strongâ€¦ And the Armor of Angel doesn't exist any more! Without the Warriors' strongest power, we'll never win!" She clutched his shirt in her hands, tears falling down her face. "If I'd never gotten rid of my armorâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "If you hadn't, Sage would still be dead. I don't think that's a price you would want to pay."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Instead, my son's life will be taken! I don't want that eitherâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Rowen touched her cheek lightly. "I won't let that happen. Kenji will be safe, I promise you."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Thank you so much for helpingâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Hey, we're friends, Shara. And friends always help each other." He moved closer, an intense look on his face. "Besidesâ€¦ I'd do anything for you. No matter what happens, I will always protect you..."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She gazed into his midnight blue eyes, as dark as the sky just before the sun completely sets. They were only inches away, burning with a fiery passion that she recognized all too clearly. "Rowenâ€¦" Shaking her head, Shara pulled out of the embrace. "No. No, we can'tâ€¦ I can'tâ€¦" She picked up her sword and slipped it back into its sheath. "Let's go find the others."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He sighed and nodded. "Of course. Time to try and save the worldâ€¦ again."

---

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Hey, Shara! Rowen!" Kento waved from the porch, his mouth full and a giant hamburger clutched in one hand. "Wha' ah oo too 'oin' 'ere?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Cye emerged from the house, drying his hands on a dishtowel. "You know, Kento, it would be easier to understand what you say if you'd swallow first." His smile faded as he saw the expressions on Rowen and Shara's faces. "What has happened?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Iâ€¦ was attacked on the forest trailâ€¦ on my way to the training field. It was a Dynasty warrior, and heâ€¦

heâ€¦" Shara's voice faltered.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Rowen squeezed her hand and finished the sentence. "Kenji was kidnapped, and we're not sure why."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Kento nearly dropped his food. "Little Man? Kidnapped? No way! They can't get away with that!" He clenched his fist and punched the railing. "We've gotta find Ryo and Sage so we can get him back!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Ryo should be easy to find," Cye mused, "but Sageâ€¦ Shara, do you know where he went to train?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She bit her lip, shaking her head sadly. "He never tells me. I've begged him time and time again to let me know, so I could contact him in case of an emergency. But he never listens."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Don't worry." Rowen smiled at her. "We'll call Ryo, and then search for Sage. He can't be too far away."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "But what if-"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "We'll find him, Shara." Cye turned and walked back into the house. "I'll phone Ryo right away."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â A long silence consumed the trio still outside. Leaning against the railing, Kento gazed out toward the horizon and finally disrupted the quiet. "Ya know, Sage is probably-"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Right here." Shara, Rowen, and Kento spun around at the sound of the voice. A tall blond man stood at the edge of the lake, his sword casually propped on his shoulder.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Sage!" She dashed across the yard and threw her arms around him. "I'm soâ€¦ so gladâ€¦" Her voice broke as tears flooded her eyes once more.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He stroked her hair gently. "Shar? What's wrong? Why are you crying?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Kenjiâ€¦ heâ€¦ heâ€¦ he'sâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Sage's body stiffened and he gripped her shoulders tightly. "Kenji? Where is he?" He shook Shara slightly. "Tell me! Is heâ€¦ heâ€¦ dead?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "No! Of course not! It's justâ€¦" She closed her eyes and leaned against him. "I couldn'tâ€¦ couldn't stop himâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Shara!" Sage cried in exasperation. "Just tell--"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "He was kidnapped!" Shara sobbed. "Byâ€¦ byâ€¦ the Dynastyâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Sage paled and pulled Shara tight against him. "Oh, Godâ€¦ I'mâ€¦ Howâ€¦ how did it happen?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "We were on our way to the training field, to meet Rowen. A man appeared ahead of us and threatened to take Kenji. So Iâ€¦ I drew my sword and tried to fight him off, butâ€¦ he wasâ€¦ just too strong for me. The man grabbed Kenji, said the Dynasty could really use him, and vanished. Then Iâ€¦ I guess I passed out, because I don't remember anything else untilâ€¦ until Rowen arrived." She raised her head and stared into her husband's clear blue eyes. "I'm sorry I didn'tâ€¦ that I couldn'tâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "It isn't your fault," he soothed. "You could never have defeated him without your powers." He brushed a strand of golden hair out of her eyes. "If anyone is to blame, it's me. If I hadn't run off to trainâ€¦ I would've been there. Maybe evenâ€¦ saved Kenjiâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Rowen put his hand on Sage's shoulder. "Don't think that way. What's past is past. Now we need to concentrate on gettingâ€¦ your sonâ€¦ home safely."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara turned to look at Rowen, shaking her head almost imperceptibly. "You're right. Sage and I need to save our son. No matter what it takes." She stepped out of Sage's arms and straightened her black blouse. "We need to contact Kayura. See if she can open a Gate for us to travel through."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Cye returned from inside. "Ryo will be here in a few hours. Miaka really didn't want him to come, but-" he finally noticed Sage "-whenâ€¦ When did you get here?" He hurried down the steps, Kento lazily following, and clapped Sage on the back. "Wonderful! We were terrified we wouldn't be able to find you!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "I was on my way here, Cye. After three weeks of trail mix for meals, I wanted to have some of your great food." He smiled faintly. "Cooking is not one of Shar's strong points."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She rolled her eyes. "That may be so, but we have more important things to worry about." Kneeling on the ground, Shara closed her eyes and concentrated. Rowen placed his hands on her shoulders and tried to help her find Kayura's aura. An image of a slim blue-haired woman flickered before the Warriors.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Why have you suâ€¦onedâ€¦ meâ€¦ Warâ€¦ors?" She faded in and out of view.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "My son has been kidnapped," Sage told Kayura. "We need you to open a Gate to the Dynasty so we can rescue him."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Yesâ€¦ I have felt their presence stirring." A frown of puzzlement crossed her lovely face. "I wonder why they

would want to kidnap a little boyâ€¦ It doesn't seem to make any sense."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Who cares why?" Shara cried. "Just help us get him back!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Shara, if you run into a battle without knowing your enemy, failure will be the only result." Kayura's tone was harsh, but her eyes held a sympathetic spark. "We will save your son, but we must first discover their plans."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "And how will we do that?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The Ancient closed her eyes and sighed. "We will have to send a spy to the other side. Someone unknown to the Dynasty who can watch their every move without fear of their chi being detected."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "None of us can do that." Kento frowned. "Who-"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Miaka," Cye murmured.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "What?" They all turned to stare at him.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Miaka. She's the only one of us whom the Dynasty will not recognize. Right, Kayura?" After receiving a reluctant nod from the Ancient, Cye continued. "There is no other choice. Either we send Miaka, or we charge in unprepared. Either way, I'm certain there will be casualties."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Sage's face had grown paler and paler as Cye spoke. "Butâ€¦ how can we ask Ryo to send his own wife on such a dangerous mission? What if she dies? We can't do thatâ€¦ We can't ask Miaka to risk her life. This isn't her responsibility."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Don't you care about your son?" Shara whirled to glare at him. "We have to get him back! By any means necessary."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "We can't just use other people, Shara! It isn't right!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "If she volunteers, then we're not using her." She reached into her pocket and grabbed her cell phone. "And I'm going to ask her right now." Her fingers flew over the buttons.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Sage grabbed her arm. "Shara. No."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Get your hands off of me!" She shoved him away and waited while the phone rang.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Shara!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Shut up!" She turned her back on him and

spoke into the phone. "Well, hello, Miaka. No, no, not you, dear. I was talking to Sage. How are you today? â€¦ Good, that's good. â€¦ Yes, it is an awful tragedy. I'm glad your husband decided to help out. â€¦ Yes, a very brave man. You must be so proud. â€¦ Yes," she chuckled, "just as proud as I am. â€¦ Miaka. I'm afraid I must ask you for a terrible favor. We need to send a spy to the Dynasty to see what they're doing with my son. You are the only person we could think of. â€¦ No, I can't guarantee your safety. â€¦ Yes, I know how much I'm asking. Believe me, if there was any other way, I wouldn't ask. â€¦ Well, can you at least come here so we can talk face to face? â€¦ Yeah. Okay. Uh-huh. See you in a few hours. Goodbye." Shara clicked off the phone and shoved it back in her pocket. "It's done."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Her husband shook his head angrily. "I can't believe you did that, Shara. You're trying to send Miaka to her death!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I'm trying to stop my son from dying! Why can't you understand that?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "He's my son, too, Sharâ€¦" He bowed his head. "I want to save him just as much as you doâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Your sonâ€¦" She laughed bitterly. "Then _act_ like a father. Sometimes you have to sacrifice others to protect what's most important to you."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "That's not true!" Sage argued.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "She's right, man." Rowen stepped forward and put a comforting arm around Shara's shoulders. "Kenji is most important right now. Nothing else matters."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She leaned against Rowen, the strength draining from her body. "Thank you, Rowenâ€¦ It's been such a long dayâ€¦ and I'm so tiredâ€¦ Pleaseâ€¦ Take me inside."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He nodded his head and led her away from the rest of the Warriors. Sage's eyes burned into Rowen's back the entire way.

---

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Sharaâ€¦" Rowen touched her arm. "Come on, wake up. Ryo and Miaka are waiting downstairs."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Her eyes flickered open and a soft sigh escaped her lips. "I can't face them, Rowenâ€¦ Ryo is going to hate meâ€¦" Her green eyes were dark with unshed tears. "Miaka is so wonderfulâ€¦ and Ryo loves her so muchâ€¦ How can I ask her to lay down her life to help me?" She turned away from him and shook his head. "Sage was right. We just can't use her like that."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I don't knowâ€¦" He slowly sat down, resting

beside her on the edge of the bed. "Miaka married a Ronin. She knows the risks involved in just hanging around any of us. If she chooses to help, it's not because you forced her to. Ryo married a strong woman; she won't do _anything_ just because she's told to. Miaka is here because she cares about you and your family."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "My familyâ€¦" She chuckled darkly. "A husband who is disgusted with meâ€¦ and Kenjiâ€¦" A choked sob interrupted her sentence. "My precious sonâ€¦ my darling baby boyâ€¦" Her tears began to flow freely. "I love them both so muchâ€¦ And they're both being pulled away from meâ€¦ Maybe this is my punishment from Godâ€¦ Forâ€¦ forâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "No!" Rowen wrapped his arms tightly around her. "Shara, you're a good person. A wonderful mother and wife. God has no reason to punish you. The choices, theâ€¦ mistakesâ€¦ you've made in the past don't matter any moreâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She rolled over to face him and buried her face in his strong shoulder, her tears refusing to abate. "How do you know that's true, Rowen? What I didâ€¦ wasâ€¦ it wasâ€¦ horrible. I should neverâ€¦ never be forgivenâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Chuckling, he stroked her silky golden hair. "You are way too hard on yourself, Shara. It was a sin, yes. But millions have done the same thing. It isn't unique, it isn't new, it isn't unforgivable. You're sorry for what you did, and God has forgiven you because of that repentance. The only person who needs to forgive you isâ€¦ well, you. You've got to learn how to forgive yourself."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Would Sage forgive me, Rowen?" She lifted her face and gazed at him sadly.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He shook his head. "I don't know, Shara. He is your husband, and he loves you very much. If his love for you is stronger than the pain and anger he would experience, then, yes, he would have to forgive you. It all depends on the strength of his love."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "It isn't the strength of _his_ love that should be tested," she murmured bitterly and looked away.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Sharaâ€¦" With a gentle touch, he turned her face toward him again. "You are not lacking in love. If anything, you have too much of it. Not just for Sage, but for everyone."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Which is an even greater problem, Rowen. I'm only supposed to love my husband. I can't justâ€¦ just walk around loving all of you. It's not fair to Sage, and it's not fair to the rest of you either."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "There are degrees and types of love. I know you don't love Cye and Kento and Ryo in the same way that you love Sage. It's okay to love other people, Shara, as long as you can keep the lines between types clear."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "But didn't that line blur? â€¦ Didn't I become confused?" She gazed up at him, her eyes pleading desperately for his agreement. "That's all it was, right? A temporary blur of the line. Nothing more."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Rowen was torn; he didn't know what to tell her. "â€¦ Shara. Maybe that is what it wasâ€¦ Or maybe a blurred line finally became clearâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She looked stricken by his words. Almost horrified. "Rowenâ€¦ How can you say such a thing?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "It's easy to tell the truthâ€¦" He traced the line of her face with his fingertip, his dark eyes capturing her gaze. She sat still, paralyzed as he moved his lips toward hersâ€¦

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Hey, Sharâ€¦?" A light knock sounded on the partially open door. "Can I come in for a second?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Rowen quickly separated himself from her and opened the door. "Come on in, Sage. I just woke her up and was about to leave."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Oh. Thanks, Rowen." Sage slipped past him and made his way toward the bed. "Go tell the others we'll be down in a minute."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "No problem." Rowen shot one last meaningful look at her before closing the door behind him.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Sage stood beside the bed, fidgeting uncomfortably. "Sharâ€¦? Isâ€¦ Are youâ€¦ Is everything okay? Are you still upset with me?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Sage, I-"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Because I want you to understand that I was only trying to do what I think is right. I still love you and Kenji more than anything else in the world. I'd die for either of you, Shar. But I just don't think I can let someone else die for our sake. And if you can't understand that, then, well, I don't know what to do. The last thing I want to do is let Kenji or you get hurt. So maybe we _should_ just charge in and get Kenji back, but that doesn't feel right either. I don't know. I just need know how you are right now, Shar. We can figure out the rest later."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara stood up, chuckling. "Sageâ€¦ You are making almost no sense at all." Wrapping her arms around his neck, she smiled lovingly. "But I knew you were insane when I married you. Your tendency to ramble when you get nervous is adorable. Much cuter than any smooth-talking phony. Just one of the many things I love about you." She pressed her lips to his, stroking the fine blond hair at the base of his neck tenderly.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â After they parted, he slipped his arms around her waist and smiled. "Soâ€¦ I guess that I'm

forgiven?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Running her hands down his chest, the beautiful woman laughed brightly, pushing the scene with Rowen out of her mind. "Oh, definitely, Sageâ€¦ Definitely." She lifted her face to his once more and drowned in his
kiss.

---

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Glad you two could make it." Ryo grinned at Sage and Shara as they descended the stairs. "We were afraid we'd have to do this without you." He stretched his lean form across Cye's white couch, propping his feet on one of its arms. "So. What's the plan, guys?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Cye frantically swatted at Ryo's feet with his dishtowel.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara couldn't help but laugh. "I think he wants your feet off his couch, Ryo." She watched as Miaka swung his feet back onto the floor and sat beside him.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Manners, honey, manners." Miaka smiled and brushed a strand of dark red hair out of her eyes. "Now, shall we get down to business? What do you want me to do and when do I
leave?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara shook her head. "You're not going anywhere, Miaka. We decided that we can't use you like that. It isn't right, and it's not really necessary."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Liar." Miaka leaned forward in her seat, her eyes narrowing. "'If you know the enemy and know yourself, you need not fear the results of a hundred battles.' Sun Tzu. Wise words. The plan made perfect sense, Shara. You're only worrying about the possibility of me getting killed. I'm not a weakling, you know. I was training in the martial arts before I even met Ryo. And with his additional training, I know I can do pretty much any task you request. Now, without putting my safety into consideration, tell me if you need me or not."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She lowered her gaze to the floor. "â€¦ Yes, Miakaâ€¦ We need youâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Miaka sat back and nodded. "As I thought. And I'll do it."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Ryo looked back and forth between the two women, his face twisted into a look of confusion. "Ummâ€¦ excuse me. What the heck are you two talking about?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara's eyes widened. "You didn't tell him, Miaka?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "No. If I had, he wouldn't have let me come over. But I will now." Miaka turned and took her husband's hands in her own. "I have to go to the Dynasty and scout around to see what they're doing to Kenji. I'm the only one for the job because no one in the Dynasty will recognize my chi. And don't argue with me,

because I'm going, no matter what you say. Sage and Shara need my help."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He nodded reluctantly. "Fine, fineâ€¦ Do what you want, Miaka. I know I can't do anything to change your mind once it's made up. Stubborn woman." He forced a grin, trying to be his normal joking self. "And, hey, even if you don't come back, I'll be okay. 'Cause then I'll be a bachelor again. Party time."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She kissed her husband's cheek. "Don't worry. I'll come back to you, safe and sound." Miaka stood and faced the rest of the Warriors. "Alright. Let's get Kayura here so I can get out of here. The sooner I leave, the sooner I can return."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara hugged the other woman, tears in her eyes. "Thank you, Miakaâ€¦ I'll owe you for eternity."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Oh, yeah. You're going to owe me big time."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Wellâ€¦ let's get this started." Shara stepped back and called out with her mind for Kayura. Each of the Warriors joined her, until the Ancient appeared before them in a flash of gold light.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "She has agreed?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "You bet I have, lady." Miaka grinned, a dangerous look in her lovely eyes. "Open a Gate and let me through. I'm gonna kick some Dynasty butt."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "You're not 'kicking butt.' You're going for reconnaissance only." Sage gazed at her seriously. "Don't fight anyone. Run if you have to. If you get backed into a corner, then only fight until there is an opening, and then start running again."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Yeah, yeah, whatever. I'm not stupid, Sage." Miaka tossed her hair out of her face. "But I can't guarantee that I won't at least throw a few kicks and punches around. I mean, these are evil guys, right? They deserve a good butt kicking."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Miaka--"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "I'll be careful, okay? Don't worry."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Kayura raised her staff into the air. "If you're through arguing, I'll open the Gate now." A bright light surrounded the staff, and the golden hoops on the staff rang as they struck one another. Suddenly, a tall red door formed in the center of Cye's living room.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "There. That is you way into the Dynasty realm. Say your goodbyes, Miaka. Once you step through that door, it isn't easy to return." The Ancient handed the woman a small jewel.

"When you want to come back, hold this gem tightly and concentrate on this place. I will sense your mind and open the Gate once more."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Miaka tucked the crystal into her pocket and nodded. "Gotcha. Not a problem." She turned and embraced her husband one last time. "I'll be back, hon. Don't you worry." With one last wave to the rest of the Warriors, Miaka stepped through the Gate and both she and the door vanished.

---

**Author's Notes: **I hope nobody minds that I keep inventing members of the Dynasty... I just never could see it as an evil force lead by just one guy. I'm thinking of it as a big organization with all sorts of levels of power. Talpa was just a lower-class fellow. All these other enemies that are appearing are part of the higher levels of the hierarchy. If you don't think that's true... well, I'm sorry. My entire series is based on those ideas. Sooo... Wheee... ^_^ I guess you're all stuck with it. But I would like to hear any opinions on the subject. And I'm going to apologize to those of you who don't like a lot of dialogue... (*kicks 'ranza*) I like talking. I like moving a story along with speaking and speeches. But... I'll try to cut down on it for my next chapter... Though it is physically painful for me to try and do so. I guess need to give it a shot. For my fans. Or for the people I force to read this. Whichever you wanna call them. ^_^

## 4. Temptation and Weakness

**Disclaimer:** Same as before.. *sigh* I still don't own the Ronin Warriors. I still do own Shara, Miaka, Kenji, and the new Dynasty people that'll start showing up pretty soon. And I think I want to own Kento's seemingly endless supply of hamburgers. Oh, and there's a reenactment in here. If you can spot it, yay. If you can't, don't worry about it. Isn't important. Some of you may call it cheatingâ€¦ I call it paying homage to one of my favorite authors. So nyah. =P

**Temptation and Weakness**

"Faster! Harder!" Rowen demanded.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I... I can't..."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Yes, you can, Shara. Try it again!" He raised his fighting stick and set back in a defensive stance. "If you want to get your son back, you can't depend on us the entire time. We may become distracted by other battles, forcing you to fight alone. And if that happens, you're doomed. You depended on your armor for power, and now that it's gone, you're helpless." He jabbed her in the side with his staff. "Now. Try it again. Hold nothing back and attack me."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Rowen..."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Attack me!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She swung the stick at his head, then whipped it down toward his knees. A perfect feint, in her opinion. Rowen easily knocked the blow aside.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Pathetic. I saw that coming when you first moved. You telegraph your moves; your eyes give everything away." He snapped his staff forward and cracked it against her knees. "See? Never let your opponent know where you will strike next. Keep your eyes on the their face and attack and defend on instinct. Don't let you eyes stray to where you want to land a blow, or your enemy will block every one."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara looked up at him from the ground. "You could've broken my knees, dummy." She grabbed her stick and used it to push herself up. Her legs shook as they tried to keep her from falling. "This is just training; you don't have to hurt me, you know."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He shook his head. "Shara, we don't have much time. And your skills need massive improvement. I don't have the time to teach you gradually. You have to learn to defend yourself. If that means I have to endanger you, or even injure you, until you finally start getting it right, then that's what I'll do." Rowen knocked the staff away from her and sighed as she fell face-first onto the ground.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She rolled over and groaned. "Can we just quit for the day? I can't even stand, Rowen..."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He kneeled beside her and nodded. "Yeah, Shara. We can stop sparring. We still have a lot of work to do over the next couple of days, but I guess you've been beat up enough for today."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "You're not kidding. I don't even want to move." She struggled to sit up, pain etched across her face. "Okay, help needed."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen laughed. "Sorry." He slipped his arms underneath her body and cradled her against him. Standing, he carried her back to the house. "We'll start training again tomorrow. You'll get the hang of fighting
again."

---

"Good!" Rowen stepped back. "You're learning quickly,
Shara."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She grinned. "Shut up and get back to work! Compliment me later."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He shifted position--only slightly, but now he was in a fighting stance. The fight was now serious. Shara had learned that Rowen would try to disarm her first, most likely by breaking the wrist of her dominant hand. After that he'd go for nerve centers and other critical points. She had to guard against those kinds of attacks at any cost.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  A minute change in Rowen's posture alerted her, and then they both began to move.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He swung his stick up and down in a perfect arc, aiming for her right wrist. Shara blocked easily with her own staff and felt the shock as the two snakewood staves clashed. She instantly changed her grip and tried for a trap, but he whipped his stick out of the way and stood facing her
again.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She feinted toward his wrist and then tried to sweep his legs out from under him. He blocked and tried for a trap. She escaped that move and danced backward. The two began to circle each other warily, each looking for any opening in the other's defenses.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "You see the beauty of the staff? It is the most versatile weapon in the world. With a staff, you can fine-tune the degree of pain or injury caused. You can disarm and control attackers and can inflict pain without causing permanent injury. It's a strong weapon, a noble weapon. But the world shuns it for the knife or gun. Sad, really."Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â

She grinned at Rowen. "Is lecturing all you can do? Come on, boy. Make your move." Her feet whispered over the worn wooden floor.Â  She felt proud to be learning from such a talented fighter. If things went well, she could soon become a master of the weapon. Just like he was.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He went for a head strike. She blocked it and wood clashed with a sharp crack. Shara twisted her stick sharply, got leverage on his, and whipped it down, holding it against his upper thighs.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen slipped out of the trap quickly. The moment her stick was free of his, she snapped it up again, reversing her grip and thrusting toward his eyes. He deflected her thrust forcefully. She attacked again, a strike to his throat and one to his temple. He blocked and evaded, retreating to a safer position. He countered viciously, but Shara blocked with a whirlwind of strikes, pressing him until he was against the wall.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Letting me win, Rowen?" She flashed out a couple of attacks to keep him occupied.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "In your dreams, Shara." He grinned wickedly. Suddenly she felt a wave of energy that sent her reeling. It came from Rowen, a powerful shockwave of psychic power that hit her like a physical thing. It knocked her back two steps and made her struggle for balance.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She panted, her mind spinning. "How... how did you _do_ that? That's not fair."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "No enemy fights fairly. And it's not even hard. All it takes it practice." He was out of the corner. Rowen went for a side sweep, taking advantage of her lack of balance. She countered automatically, but her body and mind were still ringing with pain.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "It's something you have to learn to defend against."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He threw another shockwave at her. Shara was better braced for it now, but it still rocked her nearly off her feet. Her attention faded from his weapon just long enough for him to get inside her defense.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He drove upward to catch her stick from below. Then he twisted, sweeping her staff in a circle, forcing her even farther off balance, trying to topple her backward. As Shara tried to recover, he struck to her elbow. Hard.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â It was a different sound from the crisp crack of wood hitting wood. This was softer, duller, the sound of wood striking flesh and bone. Shara gasped in pain, fire shooting up her arm, into her shoulder, and she lost her grip on the stick with her right hand. She forced her fingers to close on it again, but they were numb. She couldn't feel what she was holding. She couldn't block properly with only one arm.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â And Rowen was advancing. Two more strikes and he got through her guard again. The staff slammed into her ribs and she felt another wave of sickening pain.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He got her on the knee. Pain sparked up and down her leg, lighting every nerve. She had to back up. He was attacking relentlessly, forcing her to the wall.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "You can give up, Shara. If I'm too much for you to handle."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "No way. I'll never give up." She clenched her teeth, wildly trying to think of a new plan. Rowen was stronger and that blasted psychic power was dangerous. She had to use her mind, come up with something clever.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She had it. Time to trick him.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara stopped backing up and took a step sideways, deliberately putting herself in a position where she could only make a clumsy block. Then she gave him an opening, holding her staff awkwardly, its tip toward him but drooping too far down.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "My elbow... It hurts..." She willed him to believe her. _It's making me too distracted... My right side is unprotected. You can come in to finish me off without trying to incapacitate me any more._

He fell for it, no longer trying to back her into the corner. Rowen was moving in for the kill. His eyes narrowed in concentration as he maneuvered for a decisive strike. A takedown to end the combat.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â As he raised his staff to make the strike, Shara pulled her own stick back as if she was afraid to block, afraid of the jarring contact. She let her shoulders droop and her body sway

tiredly. It wasn't hard to fake. She really was exhausted, and it was difficult to move.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen made the attack she wanted, straight down. Shara slid her leading foot back, shifting just out of range. His staff whistled by her nose. Before he could raise his stick to defend himself, she lunged. She put all the power of her body behind it, all her strength, slipping in between Rowen's arms and driving the staff into his midsection. The air in his lungs exploded out in a harsh gasp and he doubled over.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara didn't hesitate. By the time he was completely bent over she was already whipping her stick out and around to strike him behind the knee. Again, she put her whole weight behind the blow, following through to scoop him onto his back.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen landed with a thud. Before he could move, Shara snap-kicked hard, catching his wrist and knocking his staff away. It clattered across the floor. Then she held the pointed end of her own stick to his throat.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I win," she said smugly.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen merely smiled up at her. "Did you?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She saw his pupils dilate and braced herself, shifting her stick minutely to push into his collarbone as she leaned forward. Another wave of energy smashed into her. She could almost see it now. It was like the downrush of a nuclear cloud, the part that went flowing along the ground, destroying everything in its path, spreading in a circle from the point of impact. It seemed a faint blue color, the same as Rowen's dazzling eyes. And it still packed quite a punch.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara gritted her teeth and hung on to the fighting stick, keeping it in place, letting the energy wash through her. It blew her hair back as if it were a hot wind. It seemed to last forever.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  When it was finally over, she was tingling with pain. And Rowen was still trapped.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Anything else you care to try?" She grinned down at him. Every bruise on her body hurt afresh in the aftermath of the blast--but she wasn't going to let that show.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "No. But this battle isn't over yet. It won't end until one of us gives up. And I certainly won't do that. I'll just lay here and recharge my energy so I can let loose another blast. You'll succumb to your wounds eventually."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "You don't know when to quit, do you?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "You're not supposed to give up in battle,

Shara. It's always a fight to the death."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She grabbed his wrist and locked it, with her hand holding his and her stick on top of his wrist. She could use leverage here to cause severe pain or to break the bone.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Give up, Rowen."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Sorry, but no."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She didn't want to break his wrist, but she knew she had to. And soon, before he regenerated enough to hit her again. She couldn't take another of those blasts. Shara put enough pressure on his wrist to really hurt him, hoping he would just give up and end the battle. When he just continued to smile, she put on even more pressure. She could tell it was hurting him by the pain in his eyes. It was hurting _her_ to keep the steady pressure up. Shooting stars of pain were zinging in her elbow.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â _I have to do it, _she thought sadly. She tensed her muscles, preparing to snap his wrist.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Rowen took a quick breath, a hiss of pain. His eyes lost their brilliant glow, unfocusing as he winced. Shara let go of his wrist and collapsed to sit beside him, breathing hard.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "What are you doing?" He stared at her in amazement.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "I don't knowâ€¦ I just... I couldn't go through with it, Rowen. I can't hurt you."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "I didn't surrender. It isn't over."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "I know, I know... Go ahead. Blast away. Cripple me. Kill me. Whatever you want."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "You like pain or something?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Yeah, that's it, Rowen." She turned to face him, eyes blazing with anger. "I love pain! Can't get enough of it! Come on, give it to me, baby."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He sat up and shook his head, laughing,. "You are positively insane." He paused and gazed at her thoughtfully for a while. "So. Why didn't you do it?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Because I knew you wouldn't give up, even if I did break your wrist. I'd have to break every bone in your body, and that wasn't a pleasing thought. And I was also pretty scared of that bloody psychic power of yours."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "I could teach it to you, you know. It really isn't that hard. None of the other Ronins can do it, but... well,

maybe you can."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "I doubt that. If Ryo can't do it, there's no way I can." She looked up at the ceiling and smiled. "Want to get this fight going again?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He was staring at her hand gripping the snakewood staff. Shara tried to keep that hand steady, but she could feel the fine tremors in the muscles. She took a deep breath and clenched her teeth, making her gaze challenging.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â _I can fight again. I can do it because I have to. I have to show Rowen that I'm not a wimp... That I can still fight. This time I won't let any sympathy get in the way of beating him. I have to win._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â _He looked back at her, the amused smile still on his face. "No. I'll give in. No more fighting."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â For some reason, that angered her. Injured her pride, perhaps. "Why? Because I'm tired? Because you don't think I can beat you?" She whipped the stick up, ready to shatter his skull.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Because you've lost your mind." That maddening smile refused to go away. "And you won fairly the first time. It's over. No big deal."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She stared at him and slowly lowered the staff. "You just don't want me to beat you up any more." A smile tugged at the corners of her mouth.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Yeah, that's it." He stood up and offered his hand to her. "Come on. Let's go in and get something to eat. Cye's probably fixed a feast."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She took his hand gratefully and stood on unsteady legs. They started toward the training hall's door that would lead them outside. From there it was just a short walk to the house. Suddenly, her injuries became overwhelming and Shara collapsed to the ground. Rowen hurriedly fell to his knees beside her.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Shara! Are you alright?" His dark eyes were wild with worry.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She tried to sit up again, wincing at the sparks of pain shooting through every part of her body. "Just a few broken ribs. No big deal," she joked weakly. "Thanks a lot."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He leaned forward and began to go over her body with his expert touch. "Can you move everything? Is your arm broken? Do you feel any numbness?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "I can move everything just fine... well, except for my right arm, of course. But I think it's just really badly bruised. It should be okay in a few days. And I only wish that

I was numb somewhere. Anywhere."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He looked ashamed. "I'm sorry, Shara. I just wanted to teach you how to fight. I guess I got a bit carried away, huh?" Rowen's eyes were dark with unhappiness. Sadder than she had ever seen him before.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "You can say that again. But I'll be okay, Rowen. Don't worry. I'm a tough girl, after all." She tried to smile to reassure him, but it died as another wave of pain swept over her.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Yes, you are... But you're still hurt. I'm so, so sorry..." He touched her cheek, looking pained. She suddenly felt dizzy, as if she were falling from some great height. His eyes were fixed on her face, and they were all Shara could see. The rest of the world was a blur. All that could be heard was his soft breathing, all that could be felt was the gentle touch of his hand.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Shara..."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  They were leaning toward one another. The sensation of falling intensified, and Shara had nothing to hold onto but him. And then Rowen's arms were around her and she felt his warm mouth touch hers.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The kiss was sweet and gentle. Shara began to relax in Rowen's arms, her arms encircling him before she realized what she was doing. Their hearts beat in unison, each pounding with the passion building between them. This was nothing like kissing Sage. With him, she felt safe and secure. But with Rowenâ€¦ A tremor rushed through her, setting her entire body on fire. This was exciting, invigorating, dangerously pleasurable. It suddenly struck her that this was wrong, but that only added to the excitement.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  _Anything forbidden is exciting, Shara._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  _Now she could sense his mind, his thoughts, and apparently he could hear hers as well. Rowen, going through her mind, seeing all her thoughts, her fears, her darkest fantasies. It was a terrifying thought, yet she craved it intensely. Someone to finally know and understand everything about her. She blew away the smoke screen that shielded the deepest parts of her mind and invited him inside.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  _Are you sure, Shara? I don't knowâ€¦ I don't know if I shouldâ€¦_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  _She tried to draw him into her mind. _I'm certain, Rowenâ€¦ Please. I needâ€¦ I need someone to understand meâ€¦ I needâ€¦ noâ€¦ I want you to see all there is to see. Maybe you can understand better than even I can._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  _As soon as she thought it, he let his mind flow into hers, brushing her thoughts as lightly as a butterfly's wings. His essence was so strong, full of bright optimism, vibrant with the power of life. But the strongest part of all was his fierce

protective feelings toward her. He'd ceased trying to fight against the connection; he was giving himself to her completely. She responded in the only way she could: by surrendering her last doubts and allowing her thoughts to freely stream into his mind. His happiness nearly overwhelmed her. His thoughts embraced hers, holding her mind as gently as his arms held her body.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Suddenly a dark wind swept into both their minds, shattering the illusory world in which they had been wrapped. They were torn apart, though each clung to the other desperately. Their quiet little world vanished and Shara and Rowen were snapped back into reality.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "What the heck is the matter with you two? I called your names five times." Ryo was staring at them both, his eyes wide. "It's likeâ€¦ you were in some kind of crazy trance."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara lifted her head from Rowen's shoulder and looked up at the black-haired Warrior, relieved that they had stopped kissing at some point. "Iâ€¦ I don't know. We were trainingâ€¦ and then we stopped. I was hurtâ€¦ we were walkingâ€¦ I fellâ€¦ And thenâ€¦" Her eyes narrowed in thought. "I don't know what happened. It was likeâ€¦ I just wasn't here any longer. Weird."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen continued to hold Shara gently. "You must have passed out, hon. All that pain must've just shocked your system and made you faint."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Only one problem with that theory, Rowen." Ryo tilted his head thoughtfully. "You were completely out of it, too."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I think I can explain that, too. I used my psychic energy three times. It must've drained all my mind's energy and made me pass out, too. Shortly after Shara did, apparently."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Uh-huh. Right." His bright blue eyes narrowed. "Very, very strangeâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Yeah." Rowen stood slowly, brushing dust off his loose-fitting white pants. "Very strange, indeed. Oh, well. Hey, what did you come out here for anyway, Ryo?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Oh. Right." Ryo shook his head, the puzzlement vanishing from his face. "Cye wanted me to come tell you two that lunch's ready. To come and get it before Kento eats it all. So. Message delivered. You two gonna come?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara nodded. "Yeah, just a minute. As soon as I can limp my way back to the house."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Man, what did you do to her, Rowen?" Then Ryo grinned. "No need to worry, Miss Shara. You've got two big, strong Ronins by your side! Walking isn't necessary." He scooped her up off the ground and stepped out the door. "Come on, Rowen! Don't get left behind!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I'm coming, I'm comingâ€¦" Rowen stared at the ground, his eyes shining with wonder. "What was thatâ€¦? How did it happenâ€¦?" Running his fingertips over his lips, he smiled. He could still taste her kiss. If nothing else, the dreamlike world in which they had been enveloped only served as proof that there was something very special between the two of them. Something that maybe even Sage couldn't overcome. The thought made Rowen's smile grow even wider.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Rowen!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Yeah. I'm coming." He tore his eyes from the floor. With one last smile, the tall blue-haired man walked out, shutting the door behind him.

Sunlight streamed in through the hall's windows, filling the empty room with the brilliant light of day.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Unnoticed by the Warriors, a spot on the floor was in shadow, throbbing with dark energy. The very place where Rowen and Shara had shared their embrace. A tall man rose out of the floor, his black and red armor incongruent with the brightness of the sunlit room. He chuckled darkly, a twisted grin on his face, before he vanished.

---

**Author's Notes: **Intrigued? Wondering what's next? Hmmâ€¦ you're not the only one. _ I don't have any idea where to go from here. I'm not even sure if I should keep that last partâ€¦ I don't want anyone to think that Shara and Rowen's feelings are evilâ€¦! *pouts* Oh, well. Guess it's too late to change anything now, huh? ^_^ Besides, I'm sure I can weasel my way out of that assumption some how. Anyway, tell me what ya think so far. If I get even _one_ good review, I'll write another part. Without itâ€¦ eh, I'll probably write another chapter anyway. ^_^ Even if no one reads my stuff! Persistence will draw me some readers, some day. â€¦ I hope.

## 5. Heart-Breaking Confrontation

**Disclaimer:**Â  Does everyone get tired of reading these things like I get tired of writing them?Â  Okay, I don't own the Ronin Warriors.Â  If I did, I'd be a rich girl and wouldn't spend my time sitting in my room decorated with nude Rowen pictures (kidding, kidding!Â  Me es not ecchi.) and writing fanfics for the Internet.Â  Shara, Miaka, Kenji, and the two new Dynasty guys are mine, though.Â  And guess what!Â  One of them is about to get a name!Â  *gasp!*Â  Anyway, no taking them!

Heart-Breaking Confrontation

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Fixed a huge feast as usual, eh, Cye?"Â  Rowen wandered into the dining room, fresh out of the shower and now wearing jeans and a dark blue shirt that clung to his damp skin.Â  "Good thing.Â  After all that training, I'm starving!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "And I'm suffering."Â  Shara groaned as she

limped into the room and collapsed in one of the dining table's chairs.Â  "I gave myself a quick examination when I went to take my shower.Â  My ribs are definitely cracked, if not broken, and I'm pretty sure you caused major damage to my elbow and knee.Â  It could take weeks for me to recover!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He walked over to stand behind her and ran his fingers through her wet ponytail.Â  "I'm sorry, Sharaâ€¦Â  I got so carried away.Â  Is there anything I can do to help?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She shook her head.Â  "Only if you can turn that wicked psychic blast of yours into healing energy, or something.Â  You'd think the Warrior of Life would have some kind of regenerative power, right?Â  Not just a destructive one."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "The honor of healing power belongs to the Warrior of Wisdom, Shar."Â  Sage strolled into the room, and a wave of guilt seized control of Shara.Â  She simply stared at him, feeling the heat rushing to her cheeks.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He tilted his head and gave her a strange look.Â  "What's the matter, hon?Â  You look embarrassed."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She fumbled for a good answer, her mind racing in circles.Â  "Iâ€¦ummâ€¦ wellâ€¦Â  I'm just embarrassed thatâ€¦ I got beat up so easilyâ€¦Â  And that you can see me all battered and bruised like this.Â  I've always wanted to be strong for youâ€¦ but I'm just a typical easily-injured housewife, I guessâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He chuckled and kneeled beside her chair.Â  "You could never disappoint me, Shar.Â  And you're anything but typical!"Â  He planted a kiss on her hand, and another on the inside of her wrist.Â  "Regardless, I can fix your injuries, I think.Â  On this last training trip I was hurt when I fell off of a cliff, but the fall also seemed to help me master a new power. That's part of the reason I hurried back here," he said sheepishly.Â  "I wanted to show off to the guys.Â  Anyway, I fixed my own broken leg; maybe I can help you out, too."Â  Sage lifted her out of the chair and carried her into the living room, stretching her slender body across Cye's couch.Â  Cye and Rowen followed them, both curious to see Sage's miracle power.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Ryo wandered in, drying his hair with a towel.Â  "Hey, what are you guys doing?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Cye shushed his friend.Â  "Quiet.Â  Sage is trying to show us some new healing power he gained during his last training session."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Oh.Â  Cool."Â  He sat down to watch.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Ummâ€¦Â  How, exactly, is this going to work?"Â  She looked up at Sage nervously, the heat of embarrassment refusing to leave her cheeks.Â

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Just relax.Â  Let me take care of you."Â  He placed his hands delicately on her wounded knee and closed his eyes.Â A look of concentration passed over his face, his lips pressed tightly together as he thought.Â  Shara watched his lithe fingers begin to slowly massage the afflicted area, sending waves of warmth rippling through her leg.Â  It was a delightful feeling, one that sent her reeling with pleasure.Â  His hands seemed to be growing warmer and warmer, as was the skin he touched.Â  She gazed in amazement when a faint emerald light seemed to emit from his palms.Â It touched her skin and was slowly absorbed, turning her knee an iridescent green.Â  A drowsy feeling of peace descended on Shara, and she laid flat on the couch.Â  Her eyes drifted closed; the warm feeling easing her into sleep.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Shara."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She felt a gentle touch on her shoulder.Â "Mmmâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Come on, wake up.Â  You're all done."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She reluctantly opened her eyes and gazed up at Sage's smiling face.Â  "Alreadyâ€¦?Â  Darn.Â  Remind me to get hurt more often, as long as I get this treatment every time."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He laughed.Â  "You enjoyed it, I take it?"
> Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Oh, yeah.Â  Better than sex."Â  She grinned playfully and sat up, rolling her shoulders and flexing the muscles of her right arm and leg.Â  "And it really works, too.Â  Very cool."Â  Shara stood up and took a couple steps around the room, putting all her weight on her formerly injured knee to test its strength.Â  "Seems good as new.Â  Thanks a lot, Sage."<p>

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "My pleasure, Shar."Â  He embraced his wife and placed a soft kiss on her cheek.Â  Shara's cheeks burned pink: for the first time in her life, she felt uncomfortable in Sage's arms.Â Â  The feeling terrified her.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She pulled out of his hug and forced a bright smile.Â  "Well!Â  Now that we're done with _that_.Â  Let's go eat!"Â Shara strode quickly into the dining room, hoping no one had noticed the tense note in her voice.Â  The other four Warriors followed closely behind her.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Hey, guys!"Â

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "â€¦. Oh, great."Â  Rowen stared in dismay at the table.Â  "Guess we're not going to have much of a feast, after all."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Kento sat at the table, a stack of empty dishes beside his plate.Â  A turkey drumstick was clutched in his fist, half-eaten.Â  Beside it was a huge pile of bones:Â  the rest of the two turkeys Cye had prepared.Â  He picked up another bowl and downed the rest of the steamed rice in one gulp.Â

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "You guys are missing a great meal!Â  Come on, eat something!"Â  He picked up three sushi rolls in his chopsticks and swallowed them practically whole.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "What's left to eat?" Ryo muttered, annoyance slipping into his voice.Â  "Honestly, Kento, does your stomach ever get full?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara shook her head and laughed.Â  "I doubt it.Â  Anyway, we better grab something before it's all gone!"Â  As she started toward her plate, a sudden flash of gold light lit the room.Â  Kayura stood on the table, a dark look in her eyes.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "I have tragic news.Â  Miaka has been captured."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Ryo's face went white.Â  "Noâ€¦Â  Howâ€¦Â  How did it happen?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "The last image I saw from her mind was that of the castle's throne room.Â  I assume the she was seen and knocked unconscious.Â  The crystal I gave her has also been taken.Â  If it was still in her possession, I could track her position and retrieving her would be rather simple.Â  But now any rescue mission will be much more complicated."Â  She looked at each Warrior gravely.Â  "That is, if you think it would be wise to try and rescue her.Â  If it is more important than adhering to the plan."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Of course we'll try and get her back!"Â  Sage look shocked that Kayura could even suggest leaving Miaka to endure the Dynasty's torture.Â  "Our original plan was good, but it would only work if Miaka stayed out of sight.Â  And she didn't.Â  So now we need a brand new idea."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Ryo nodded.Â  "And I have the perfect plan."Â  He raised his hand and shouted to the heavens.Â  "Armor of Wildfire!Â  Tao chi!"Â  His red and white armor appeared piece by piece in flashes of brilliant light, covering his muscular form from head to toe.Â  Pink cherry blossoms carpeted the dining room's floor and table as they showered around the Warrior.Â  After the transformation was complete, Ryo drew his two katanas and shifted into a fighting stance.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Now we fight."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Each Ronin nodded slowly, seeing they had no other choice.Â  One by one, the men called on the Armors they hadn't used for almost seven years.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Armor of Hardrock!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Armor of Torrent!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Armor of Strata!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Armor of Halo!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The five Warriors stood side-by-side, the same

determined gleam in each set of blue eyes.Â  They were ready for action.Â  Five incredible powers of five extraordinary young men united by a common goal.Â  No force on the earth could have stood against them.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  But the Dynasty was not of Earth.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "You guysâ€¦"Â  Shara bit her lip.Â  "I don't want to burst your heroic bubbles, or anything, butâ€¦Â  This is completely pointless.Â  I mean, I don't want to abandon Miaka any more than the rest of you, but there's no way you five will be a match for the new level of Dynasty Warlords.Â  You couldn't even beat the last ones!Â  And the guy I saw was much stronger than I remember the last guys to be."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Shara, there weren't any Warlords last time.Â  Only an Emperor and some pathetic minions.Â  As far as you know, the new guys could be much weaker than us." Sage tried to reassure her.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Ryo snorted.Â  "The only reason the guy you faced seemed so tough is because you're a wimp, Shara.Â  Without your Armor, a five-year-old could beat you up."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She stiffened, trying to suppress an angry retort.Â  Shara took a deep breath and chose her words very carefully.Â  "I'm going to let that slide, Ryo, because I know you're just worried about your wife.Â  As I was sayingâ€”"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "No, I'm not 'just worried about my wife.'Â  I'm angry at _you_.Â  If it wasn't for your pathetic weakness, Miaka wouldn't be in trouble.Â  If you were a good enough mother and had protected Kenji, none of this would've happened!Â  It's all your fault, Shara!"Â  Flames sparked in the depths of Ryo's eyes, burning with rage and, a little deeper, an unfathomable sadness.Â  "Because of you, everything I hold dear has been taken from me!Â  And I will neverâ€¦ _ever_â€¦ forgive you for that!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She staggered back, each word, each insult like a physical blow.Â  "Noâ€¦Â  It wasn'tâ€¦ I didn't meanâ€¦Â  Guys?Â  Doâ€¦ do you all think that?"Â  Shara looked from one Ronin to the next.Â  Each man averted his gaze from her.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She collapsed in one of the chairs, a pain growing in her chest.Â  "Youâ€¦ you all do.Â  You agree with himâ€¦"Â  Shara looked at Sage and Rowen again.Â  "Even you two?"Â  The two Ronins looked at each other, and then went back to studying the toes of their boots.Â  The pain grew sharper, like someone had thrust a dagger into her heart and was now twisting it to deepen the wound.Â  It was a new feeling, and one Shara wasn't thrilled about experiencing.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Sageâ€¦ my own husbandâ€¦Â  And Rowenâ€¦"Â  Her words caught in her throat as she choked back tears.Â  "I can't believe thisâ€¦.Â  You think I've doomed Ryo's wife?Â  That I was just too careless when the Warlord attacked me?"Â  With each word, her grief gave way to all-out fury.Â  "You honestly think I just let

Kenji be taken?Â  Because I didn't want to try to help him?"Â  She shot to her feet and glared at them all, eyes flashing with indignation.Â  "I _love_ my son!Â  I can't believe any of you think I would just let him be stolen from me!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She stepped in front of Ryo and poked a finger in his chest.Â  "And you!Â  I know how much Miaka means to you.Â  She was my friend before you even met her!Â  I care about her almost as much as you!Â  I never want to see her hurt!Â  I didn't send her out so she could get hurt.Â  She _volunteered_, Ryo.Â  Because she _cared_ about me and my family.Â  Because she wanted to _help_.Â  And all you can do is point fingers and whine.Â  If you didn't want her to go, you should've tried to stop her.Â  Not that you really could've, or anything.Â  But that isn't even the point!"Â  She shook her head and jabbed him with her finger once more.Â  "I didn't force Miaka to go, I didn't turn her over to the Dynasty.Â  Sometimes bad things happen, and all you can do is try and fix them.Â  They're not anyone's fault; that's just how life goes.Â  So don't go blaming me for this."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She whirled to face the rest of the group.Â  "How could any of you doubt me?Â  After all I've done for you!Â  I saved all of you once!Â  If it wasn't for me, you'd all be dead!Â  Can't I get a little respect?"Â  Shara turned her gaze to Kento.Â  "You only got to move in with Cye and continue your littleâ€¦ _thing_â€¦ because I saved you from the Dynasty!Â  You'd be lost if it wasn't for me!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She faced Cye next.Â  "Same goes for you, little homemaker.Â  Your life would be nothing without Kento, and I brought him back to you.Â  Where's the gratitude?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Next was Sage.Â  "And _you_.Â  My own _husband_!Â  How could you turn on me like this?Â  How could you think that I have anything less than the best intentions?Â  You _know_ me, Sage!Â  You know I only want the best for everyoneâ€¦Â  I'd never try to hurt any of you intentionallyâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Last she switched her attention to Rowen.Â  "As for youâ€¦"Â  Shara lowered her head for a moment and took a deep breath.Â  "â€¦ I don't know what to say to you.Â  After all we've been through togetherâ€¦ After all I've done to make things okay for youâ€¦Â  To try to make you happyâ€¦Â  How could you, Rowenâ€¦?Â  Howâ€¦?"Â  She fell to her knees in front of him and wept openly, her fury finally conquered by sorrow.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Cye and Kento exchanged glances, each feeling the truth of Shara's words.Â  Ryo gazed at the floor thoughtfully, partially ashamed of his behavior.Â  Sage simply stared at his crying wife, feeling guilty for treating her with such cruelty.Â  But not one of them moved to comfort her.

(**AN**:Â  Warning, warning!Â  Major cheesy lines ahead.Â  *cringes*)

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen gazed down at her, and his heart almost broke.Â  She had done everything for him, had done everything in her power to make sure his life went as smoothly as possible.Â  That he

wouldn't make any unnecessary enemies, or destroy his own soul with jealousy and bitterness.Â  She was innocence and honesty and faith.Â  But he had ripped that all away.Â  He didn't have the right to condemn her after all he had done, after all he had taken away from her.Â

Rowen looked at the Warriors, all frozen in place.Â  He couldn't understand why one of them didn't move to hold Shara, to comfort her, to offer apologies.Â

_Well, if they won't, I will.Â  Someone has to show Shara that she's still loved._

He kneeled beside her and wrapped the sobbing woman in a loving embrace.Â  He pressed his lips against her silky golden hair before tilting her face up so he could kiss away her tears.Â  "Don't cry any more, Sharaâ€¦Â  We all love you.Â  No matter how upset and irrational we get, each of knows in his heart how important and wonderful you are.Â  We'll never forget.Â  _I'll_ never forgetâ€¦"Â  Rowen ran his thumb over her damp cheek and smiled softly.Â  "And I never want to see you cry.Â  It hurts me to see you in painâ€¦Â  I hope you know thatâ€¦"

She closed her eyes and nodded slowly.Â  "Yes, Rowenâ€¦Â  I know.Â  I know.Â  And it's the same for meâ€¦"Â  She leaned forward, burying her face in his shoulder, and wrapped her arms around him.Â  Exactly as before, the world around them began to fade away and the two lost themselves in the blissful silence of each other's presence.

Rowenâ€¦Â  Oh, don't ever let me goâ€¦Â  I don't want to leave here, I don't want to go back to having to deal with all these problemsâ€¦Â  I just want to stay safe and warmâ€¦ and with you.Â  Forever and always.

He seemed startled by that.Â  _With me_?Â  _Foreverâ€¦?Â  Are youâ€¦ are you serious, Shara?Â  Do you truly think that you want to be with me?Â  To love me?_Â  It was like his greatest wish was about to be granted.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  _Rowenâ€¦Â  I lo--_

_Why was Rowen the first one to move?Â  Why didn't I do anything?Â  I love her more than anyone else.Â  I should've done somethingâ€¦ said somethingâ€¦Â  But now she thinks I hate her, I betâ€¦Â  I'll be lucky if she ever forgives meâ€¦Â  I threw away the one person in my life that would do anything for me.Â  The one person I love more than life itself.Â  I have nothingâ€¦_

Shara lifted her head from Rowen's shoulder, the trance suddenly broken.Â  She was feeling the anguish of her husband's thoughts.Â  Hearing his words as he berated himself for hurting her, grieving for the love he thought he had destroyed.Â  The feelings she had been experiencing with Rowen were swept away by the power of a sudden rush of overwhelming love for Sage.Â  She pulled out of Rowen's arms.

"Noâ€¦Â  No, Sageâ€¦"Â  She stood up and threw her arms around her husband's neck, placing kisses across his forehead and down the side of his face.Â  "You won't lose me this easily.Â  _I_ _love you_.Â

More than anything, more than anyone.Â  I'll never leave your side, no matter how bad things get.Â  Because you are my other half, Sage.Â  Without youâ€¦ I'm nothing.Â  Nothing."

He looked at her strangely, trying to figure out how she had known what he was thinking.Â  But then he smiled as she continued to shower his face with kisses.Â  "I wouldn't know what to do without you, Sharaâ€¦Â  You're my life.Â  I died for you, I live because of you.Â  I'm sorry I acted so coldly, sweetheartâ€¦Â  I'll never do it again.Â  Never, ever."Â  Sage cupped her chin in his hand and lowered his lips to hers, capturing them in a warm kiss._ _

Rowen stood, a bitter coldness creeping into his gaze as he stared at the couple.Â  "Break it up already.Â  It's really getting pathetic."

Kayura's wise gaze swept across the trio as she tried to analyze what was happening.Â  Ryo, Kento, and Cye all stared at Rowen, shocked by his outburst.Â  They backed up a few steps, afraid of the dark aura that seemed to be growing around the Warrior of Life.Â  Of the cold wind that had begun to sweep through the room as the darkness grew. Of the dark cloud that had drifted into the room and caused everything to be in shadow.

Sage looked at his fellow Warrior and frowned.Â  "Excuse me?"

"You heard what I said, Sage.Â  Really, this whole thing between you and Shara is pathetic.Â  There's no way she actually loves you as much as you think."

Shara turned to face Rowen, her eyes wide.Â  "Rowenâ€¦Â  Stop this.Â  You shouldn't be saying such thingsâ€¦"

He snorted derisively and took a step toward the pair.Â  His eyes were beginning to be invaded by a dark shadow, a black oil seeping across and obscuring the beautiful blue.Â  "I can say whatever I want, Shara.Â  At least the things I'll say will be the _truth_.Â  Which is more than you can say, isn't it?"

Sage shook his head, confusion written across his face.Â  "Slow down a minute.Â  Are you saying Shara is a liar?Â  Come onâ€¦ we both know that isn't true."

"Oh, isn't it?Â  Sage, Sageâ€¦Â  Would you really like to hear about your darling wife?Â  About all the lies she's told you?Â  About how completely unfaithful she is to you?"Â  Rowen tossed his head back and laughed.Â  "Sit down, kiddies.Â  Uncle Rowen is about to tell you the tale of Shara the slut."

She shrank back, her fingers curling around Sage's arm.Â  "No, Rowenâ€¦Â  You wouldn'tâ€¦Â  You _can't_â€¦"

"I can, and I will.Â  I'm sick of covering for you, Shara.Â  I'm sick of feeling terrible so you can keep your illusion of purity and light.Â  It's time to show the whole world your true colors."

He folded his arms across his chest and smiled wickedly.Â  "So.Â  Where to begin?Â  Hmmâ€¦Â  Ah, yes.Â  Let's start at the beginning.Â  Long, long ago, Sage.Â  After you had died, but before you were brought back to life.Â  Shara was simply _devastated_ by your death,

of course, as were the rest of us.Â  So devastated was she, as a matter of fact, that she had to seek outâ€¦ comfort in others.Â  Other men, to be specific.Â  Now, she came after me at one point.Â  We hadâ€¦ an entertaining night.Â  Under the stars, right by the lake that's behind her grandmother's house.Â  Actuallyâ€¦ I think it was the same place where you two had shared your first kiss.Â  I think that's what Shara said.Â  Regardless, Shara practically threw herself at me.Â  I was shocked.Â  The girl that had pledged her eternal love to someone was trying to get into another man's pants.Â  Of course I did the noble thing and pushed her away, telling her that she was just grief-stricken and that these urges would pass as the pain lessened."

"How very decent of you, Rowenâ€¦" Sage muttered.Â  He tightened his grasp on Shara, and kissed the top of her head.Â

"Wasn't it, though?"Â  The blue-haired man grinned.Â  "I'm a saint.Â  Anyway, she left, but poor Shara wasn't satisfied.Â  I imagine that she went out later that night and found herself some other guy to satisfy herself withâ€”"

"That isn't true!" she shouted out.Â  Then she grimaced, realizing that she had just confirmed the first part of Rowen's story.Â  Sage looked at her, disbelief crossing his face like a shadow.Â  Then his eyes grew more serious, smaller and darker, as he comprehended exactly what her interruption meant.

"No, perhaps that part of the story isn't entirely accurate.Â  Would you like me to continue, Sage?"

Tears began to gather in Shara's eyes once more..Â  "No, Rowenâ€¦Â  â€¦ Sageâ€¦Â  Pleaseâ€¦ stop himâ€¦"

He simply ignored her and grimly nodded.Â  "Yes, Rowen.Â  Tell me everything."

"Very well."Â  He tapped one finger against his chin and remained quiet for quite a while.Â  "Oh, yes.Â  The night you were resurrected.Â  To be honest, I had fallen in love with Shara by then.Â  She just seemed so vulnerable and innocent.Â  It really is a clever faÃ§ade.Â  Anyway, we were embracing on a car, and I was just about to declare my love when you appeared to spoil the moment.Â  I was crushed, of course, but I decided that Shara's happiness was all that should matter to me.Â  So I let you two go on your merry way, and actually accepted your offer to be best man at your wedding three weeks later. Â Boy was _that_ a stupid decision.Â  Seeing the woman you love walking down the aisle with another man doesn't exactly stir warm feelings in you.Â  Especially when you're best man and have to try and be happy about the entire thing.Â  I don't know how I managed to keep it together that day.Â  No man should have to go through that, let me tell you.

"But I digress.Â  After you two returned from your little honeymoon, and after you were off on the first of your many training expeditions, I came over to your house to talk to Shara about what had been going on between us before you came back.Â  It was your basic 'I love you, but I know there's nothing I can do about it' speech.Â  Your wife wasâ€¦ very understanding, to say the least.Â  She hugged me and told me how very sorry she was that I was hurting so badly.Â  I cried, she comfortedâ€¦Â  We talked for hours and

hours, holding each otherâ€¦Â  One thing led to anotherâ€¦Â  I ended up staying the night in your house.Â  In your connubial bed.Â  With your lovely, lovely wife."Â

"I don't think you gave her enough on your honeymoon, Sage.Â  I swear she was like an animal that night."Â  Rowen's eyes glittered with devilish glee as he saw the anguish on Sage's face.Â  "She just couldn't get enough!Â  Four times, five timesâ€¦ I lost count after a while.Â  But each time was just absolutely amazing.Â  Shara's a virtual sex goddess.Â  Which really isn't that surprising.Â  A girl as beautiful and agile as Shara has no excuse to be anything less than perfect in bed."

He paused in his storytelling and took a step forward.Â  Rowen extended one arm and ran his hand down Shara's face, to her neck, and then down across her chest.Â  "Speaking of which, have you ever taken a moment and just really _looked_ at what you have, Sage?Â  The exquisite beauty of you wife?Â  Long, slender legs.Â  Creamy white skin, soft under your fingertips.Â  Flat, smooth stomach.Â  Long gold hair as soft as silk.Â  Amazing emerald eyes as deep as the oceans.Â  And, of course, the most lovely and luscious breasts in creation.Â  Absolutely delicious.Â  No man could stop himself from falling in love with her.Â  So I did what I'd always dreamed of doing.Â  What all of us have probably thought about at one time or another.Â  Well, except for the Dynamic Duo over there."Â  Rowen jerked his thumb in Cye and Kento's direction.

"Of course I felt a bit of guilt over sleeping with the wife of one of my best friends, but I pushed it aside the moment we began.Â  And I never thought about it again that entire night.

"Of course, the next morning s_he_ felt just awful.Â  She made me promise to never breathe a word of what had happened.Â  What else could I do?Â  I didn't want you to hate me, Sage.Â  No matter how in love I am with your wife, I know I can't let it get in the way of how we work together.Â  Our duty as Ronins is too important.Â  So I walked out that morning and didn't look back."

Rowen lowered his hand and smiled coldly at Shara.Â  "There.Â  Story told, love.Â  Unless you want me to continue with the latest news."

"No.Â  You've done quite enough, Rowen."Â  She stepped out of the circle of Sage's arms, feeling as if she had no right to be held by such a noble man.Â  She felt sullied, polluted.Â  Like a foul beast that had no place within this group of righteous men.Â  But she could still sense the corrupted air of the room.Â  Something was seriously wrong.Â

Shara took Rowen by the hand and touched his cheek.Â  "I know this isn't you.Â  Rowen would never say such horrid things.Â  I don't know what's wrong, I don't know why you suddenly started spouting all thoseâ€¦ thoseâ€¦ terrible things, or why your eyes have turned so blackâ€¦Â  But I do know you, Rowen.Â  I know that you don't think such things, and would certainly never say them."Â  She ran her hand down his armored chest and sighed.Â  "So please.Â  Whatever you're doing, whatever's making you do thisâ€¦Â  Fight it off, Rowen.Â  Stop it from controlling you."

His eyes widened.Â  "Sharaâ€¦"Â  A sudden spasm shook his body, and a

brilliant blue light flashed from his eyes.Â  He threw his arms around Shara and pressed his face into her hair.Â  "Let me go!Â  I don't want to hurt them!Â  I don't, I don't!"Â  He began to sob and clutched the woman even more tightly.Â  His tears seemed to be a trigger, and the darkness that had crept into the room slowly began to gather in one spot.Â  A shadow of a man formed behind Shara and Rowen.Â  It appeared in more detail, bit by bit, until an intimidating man dressed in red and black armor stood in the room.

"My, my.Â  You two managed to shatter my magic.Â  Impressive."

Sage drew his sword and advanced on the newcomer.Â  "Who are you?"

"Me?"Â  He chuckled.Â  "Call me Eros."

---

**Author's Notes:**Â  Yeah, yeah, I know.Â  Not the most original name ever.Â  But it fits.Â  And it sounds much better than "Cupid."Â =PÂ  So deal.Â  Anyway.Â  I know I reverted back to my "babbling" style for this chapter.Â  I actually planned on making Rowen's tale a flashback with lots of *ahem* descriptive scenes, but then I decided I needed to add something to really anger Sage terribly and that would give me something to work with in the future.Â  Which is where the whole "Rowen fondling and leering at Shara while he rambles on about her looks" thing came in.Â  Besides, you guys need to know how very sexy this woman is!Â  Think of the most perfect and beautiful supermodel you can imagine.Â  Now.Â  Subtract the part about weighing only 80 lbs (no female character of mine is going to weigh under 125 or maybe even 140, thank you very much.Â  Women need curves, darn it!), then add curves in all the right places.Â  Now add cat-like eyes, a mane of gold hair, flawless skin (that doesn't need make-up.Â  Ha!), and an impeccable taste in clothes.Â  Now you've got the general idea.Â  ^_^Â  Anyway, the description wouldn't have fit in if I'd made the whole thing a flashbackâ€¦ so that's why you have a nice long speech from Rowen.Â  Besides, if I'd gone with my original plan, I'd have to change the rating of my story quite a bit!Â  ^_^Â  As it is now, I'm thinking of bumping it up to PG-13.Â  Anyway!Â  I'm digressing, too.Â  I just want to say sorry to everyone that gets annoyed at my constant talking, but I didn't have much choice this time around.Â  And now that I've proven that it just isn't my characters that babble (these AN's just keep getting longer and longerâ€¦), I'll start to work on the next chapter.Â  Ta-ta!

## 6. Manipulation and Betrayal

**Disclaimer:**Â  Another chapter, another disclaimer.Â  I've been trying to make these things at least a little entertainingâ€¦ but I've finally run out of comments.Â  So.Â  I don't own the Ronin Warriors, the Dynasty, or Kayura.Â  Shara, Kenji, Miaka, Eros, and the other new Warlord are all mine.Â  Oh, yeah.Â  And the Empress, who I'm only going to mention in passing, is also mine.

Manipulation and Betrayal

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "'Eros'?"Â Ryo snickered.Â "What kind of name is that?Â Ooooâ€¦ fear me!Â I am the mighty Warlord ofâ€¦ what, dude?Â Love?Â You're the Dynasty's Cupid?Â Oh, spooky.Â Very dangerous."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The Warlord chuckled.Â "Actually, you're not far from the truth.Â I control the feelings and emotions of others.Â Mainly lust and such."Â He spoke casually, waving his hand in a circle through the air, as if his powers were something everyone did.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Rowen raised his head from Shara's shoulder, still wiping tears from his eyes.Â "So, wait.Â You were _controlling_ me?Â Making me say things that aren't true?Â Giving me _feelings_ that aren't real?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Not quite."Â Eros smiled.Â "I can't _invent_ emotions.Â That's just impossible.Â However, I _can_ manipulate feelings that you already have, but are unwilling to express.Â Or just make slight inclinations stronger."Â He clapped his hands together slowly, sardonically.Â "And I'd like to _thank_ you two for making my job so much easier.Â Usually I have to really twist and struggle to achieve what I have with you, but you're both full of suchâ€¦ suchâ€¦ confusion and secrets.Â It's great!Â I get to save my energy that way.Â For more important things.Â Like killing all of you."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara rolled her eyes and laughed.Â "Okay.Â So.Â You're going to kill us by manipulating our emotions?Â Errrâ€¦ now, how exactly does _that_ work?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Don't be stupid, girl," he snapped back.Â "I have other talents."Â Eros waved his hand and a ten-inch dagger appeared in each hand.Â He twirled both of them in his fingertips, the deadly silver metal gleaming in the sunlight trickling in through the window behind him.Â "I'm going to kill you with these."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "With those toys?"Â Ryo raised his swords, each nearly three times longer than Eros' daggers.Â "Why am I not afraid?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Sage grinned at his fiery friend and raised his own broadsword.Â "We can take him without a problem.Â Let's go, Ryo."Â The two Warriors leaped into action, shoving Shara and Rowen out of their way.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Eros raised his daggers and jumped back, moving just out of the range of both of the Ronins' attacks.Â Sage followed, swinging his sword upward in an arc to try and slice through the Warlord's armor.Â He sidestepped and charged at Sage's side, burying a dagger in his side.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Sage staggered back, clutching the wound.Â Then he gritted his teeth, tightened his grip on the sword, and jumped up, swinging his blade down toward Eros' head.Â At the same time, Ryo attacked from the side with a slash aimed at Eros' shoulder and upper arm.Â The Warlord took a quick step backwards and watched as the two Warriors' weapons slammed into each other.Â Both Sage and Ryo's weapons fell to the floor, knocked loose by the force of their

attacks.Â  Eros stepped forward and scooped up the three swords.Â  He slammed his fist through the window and dropped the weapons outside.Â

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Who said long-range is an advantage?"Â  Eros smiled and kicked Sage in his injured side.Â  "Your weapons are cumbersome and limit your abilities.Â  Really, speed is the key to any battle."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen straightened up and nodded.Â  "I couldn't agree more.Â  But when you have range _and_ speed as advantagesâ€¦ the battle is over before it even begins."Â  He raised his bow and set an arrow in position.Â  Fury burned in his gaze as he thought about what this Warlord had done to him, the trouble he had caused with his interference.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen gave the Warlord a rakish smirk.Â  "See ya.Â  Arrow Shockwave!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The golden light that exploded from the point on the ground where the Ronin's arrow pierced struck Eros.Â  He fell back, shuddering in pain, and tried to crawl away from the energy to avoid further damage.Â  When the glow faded, Eros was lying on the floor, his armor scorched and his body weakened.Â  Yet he still managed to rise to his feet once more and face the Warriors.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Impressive power.Â  Fueled by hate, you're even stronger than usual."Â  Despite his anguish, the Warlord managed a sneer.Â  "You'd make an excellent Warlord, boy, with all that darkness in your heart."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen stiffened, his eyes narrowing.Â  "I'm not like you.Â  Don't even say that."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Oh, aren't you?"Â  Eros continued to smile.Â  "You are completely full of hate.Â  Hate for the Dynasty, hate for your friendsâ€¦ and even hate for yourself.Â  You're a pathetic excuse for a 'righteous' Ronin."Â  He gestured toward Cye and Kento.Â  "You hate them because of their happiness.Â  No matter how much the world may look down on their 'friendship', they'll always be happy with each other, and will always be accepted by the people who count the most to them.Â  You'll never have either acceptance or happiness."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Then he pointed at Ryo.Â  "Ryo and Miaka will live happily ever after.Â  Married, in love, a picture perfect couple.Â  Again, something you'll never be a part of.Â  You envy them, and hate Ryo for having something you can never have."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Next he indicated Sage.Â  "Your reasons for hating him should be completely obvious.Â  He has your girl, the woman you dream about day and night.Â  And now he's even found out about your attempts to pursue his wife.Â  Now he'll never accept you as a true friend, and he'll never give up his wife to you.Â  Because of him, you'll be an outcast in the little Warrior clique.Â  And you'll never have the love you crave.Â  Good reasons for the hate in your heart, no?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Lastly he waved at Shara.Â  "And her.Â  The woman you'll never have.Â  Who tempted you, teased you, gave you what you craved, and then took it all away.Â  Because she decided you weren't good enough for her.Â  She pities you, Strata.Â  Pities you!Â  That's the only reason you got that one chance to experience happiness, that one night.Â  Only because she thinks you're pathetic.Â  You have all the reason in the world to hate her.Â  Hey, anyone in your position would hate her."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Eros concentrated his gaze on Rowen, his black eyes taking on a silvery sheen.Â  "Don't be afraid of hate, Strata.Â  It gives you strength.Â  Power.Â  The desire necessary to eliminate those who oppose you.Â  Accept it.Â  Relish it.Â  Use it to strike down those who torment you!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen's body trembled as the words swept over him.Â  Each statement rang true in his mind.Â  He _did_ hate all of them.Â  They flaunted what they had, mocking him, taunting him with their happiness.Â  None of them cared how much it hurt him.Â  All they thought about was themselves.Â  Self-centered, terrible people.Â  They trampled his heart, and never gave it a second thought.Â  They deserved to be punished.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  A numbness started behind his eyes and began to spread throughout his body.Â  It devoured his mind, crept down his throat like a cold worm, and tainted his heart.Â  Each place it touched withered and died, becoming hollow and desolate.Â  A small rainbow began to glow within his chest, trying to fight against the darkness that threatened to destroy it.Â  But the weight of Rowen's hatred crushed the last trace of light, and the struggle ceased.Â  Rowen felt nothing, saw nothing, except the darkness.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He opened his eyes.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara stepped back.Â  She'd been shaking him, trying to pull him out of the odd stillness that had seized his body.Â  The coldness that now gleamed from his gaze was frightening.Â  Rowen's stunning eyes, which had always been dark, were now as black as the night sky.Â  But other than the color, there was just somethingâ€¦ sinister about his stare.Â  Something that promised destruction.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Roâ€¦ Rowen?"Â  Her voice trembled uncertainly.Â  She extended one hand toward him, fingertips brushing his cheek.Â  He reached up and took her hand in his, pulling her close to him.Â  His eyes were fixed on her face, burning her with the intensity of his stare.Â  Rowen placed his other hand at her waist and forced her even closer.Â  Then he pressed his cheek against hers.Â  It was a thing he had done many times before, and each time it had been with sweetness.Â  But now there was something cold and precise about his touch.Â  There was no tenderness in his movements.Â  No emotion at all.Â

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Shara."Â  His breath was icy across her cheek.Â  Her eyes widened.Â  The gentle way he had always said her name was gone. Â Now it was like he was speaking to a block of wood.Â  She couldn't understand what had happened to him, how he could ever be so chillingly detached.Â  Then his arm tensed and a wave a pain swept over Shara.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He had crushed her hand.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen moved his head back, released her hand, and shoved his hand against her face.Â  He pushed her backward with that hand, while his other pressed roughly against her lower back.Â  Shara looked up at him, noticing how his gaze had gone from ice to burning with fury.Â  The fire in his eyes seemed to fuel his body, making him stronger than humanly possible.Â  He kept pushing her backward, and her body was now nearly bent in half at the waist.Â  Any farther and she'd snap like a dry twig.Â  Shara suppressed a scream of pain as she tried to fight against his grasp.Â  But he was a Ronin and more than a match for her, even without the unearthly strength that now possessed him.Â  He kept up the pressure and a sharp pop seemed to echo through the room.Â  Then he let her go.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara collapsed to the floor and didn't move.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Eros threw back his head and laughed.Â  "Very good, boy!Â  The Empress would be quite pleased!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Sage was pale as he cradled his wife in his arms.Â  "Whatâ€¦ what have you done?!Â  Sharaâ€¦Â  Shara!"Â  He cupped her cheek in his palm and stroked her face with his fingertips.Â  "Pleaseâ€¦ please wake up!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen looked down at them, a cold smile on his face.Â  "She's not dead, you idiot.Â  But you'll never get to experience theâ€¦ pleasureâ€¦ of her company again.Â  I hope you remember the last time well.Â  Because it will never happen again."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "You bastard!"Â  Sage shook with rage, his normally calm eyes blazing.Â  "How could you do this to her?!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "All you have is memories.Â  That's all I have.Â  I'm merely giving to you what she gave to me."Â  Rowen tilted his head.Â  "Can't you see the justice?Â  She did terrible things with her body.Â  Teasing, taunting, seducing.Â  She took men's feelings, used them to get what she wanted, and then discarded them when she grew bored.Â  Now she won't hurt anyone like that again."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Sage gently lowered his wife's body to the floor and stood up.Â  "No.Â  You can't justify destroying her life, Rowen.Â  No matter how much she may have hurt you.Â  And the blame isn't all on her either.Â  You played your part in that little saga."Â  He fixed a stony gaze on his fellow Warrior.Â  "You both screwed up, but it was all over.Â  Everything would have been okay.Â  But now you've done something I can't forgive, Rowen.Â  And I'll make sure you pay dearly for it."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Sage's sword came rushing through the window, summoned by its master's surge of power, and he caught it easily.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Eros clapped his hands and actually giggled with glee.Â  "This is too good!Â  Now you're also feeling the hate burning in you, Halo!Â Â  Filling you with power!Â  The desire to kill those who hurt you!Â  Glorious, glorious!"Â  He narrowed his eyes once more and fixed his attention on the Warrior of Wisdom.Â  "Feel it within you, Halo.Â  Pulsing with energy just waiting to be tapped.Â  Use it to destroy Strata!Â  Do it, do it!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Sage's clear blue eyes met the Warlord's intense mercury gaze.Â  "Shut up."Â  He waved his hand, sending a wave of green light at the wicked man.Â  It consumed Eros, filling his body with blinding light.Â  He shrieked and jumped around, trying to find some way to escape the energy.Â  But it had become a part of him, and there was no way to separate himself from it.Â  The green power exploded in one last blast, and the Warlord was no more.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Sage turned his attention back to Rowen.Â  "Now for you."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Ryo grabbed his friend's arm.Â  "No, man.Â  Don't do it.Â  You can't kill Rowen, Sage!Â  He's our friend!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The green-clad Ronin shrugged off Ryo's hand.Â  "He's no friend of mine.Â  Let me do what I must."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Cye stepped up to join the three.Â  "Now that Eros is destroyed, perhaps Rowen will return to normal.Â  You know he wouldn't have done what he did if it hadn't been for the Warlord."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Sage shook his head.Â  "That doesn't matter.Â  The motivation may be withdrawn, but what has been done cannot be undone.Â  So I must get my revenge."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Kento also moved forward, shaking his head sadly.Â  "No, dude.Â  If you kill Rowen, you're just as bad as he is.Â  But you're evil without some guy's magic.Â  That'd make what you do even worse."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen's eyes swept from one Warrior to the next, contempt sparking in his dark eyes.Â  "Stop.Â  Let Sage do what he wants.Â  I want to fight him.Â  A battle to the death.Â  We both hate each other, so why not let us settle the score?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "There goes your theory about Rowen being okay again, Cye," Ryo muttered.Â  "But still.Â  We can't let you fight, guys.Â  It'd be a disaster to lose a Warrior, and an even bigger one if another Ronin kills him.Â  So chill your egos."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Sage merely tightened his grasp on the sword and glared at Rowen coldly.Â  "I'm ready when you are."Â  Rowen nodded silently and picked up his bow, readying an arrow.Â  The two glared at one another briefly, sizing up the situation, each waiting

for the other to make the first move.Â  Sage's right leg gave an involuntary twitch before he leapt to the right, giving Rowen the moment's warning he needed to respond correctly.Â  He moved to the left, raising his bow to deflect the blow of Sage's sword.Â  He pulled back the string of his bow quickly and tried to get off a quick shot.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Stop this!"Â  Cye thrust the tip of his trident into Rowen's arrow to block the shot.Â  Kento and Ryo moved behind Sage, each grabbing an arm to hold him back.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "There will be no more fighting in my dining room.Â  It took me forever to get this place decorated just right, and I'm not going to let your petty feuds screw up my nice and neat house."Â  He winced, aware of how pathetic his attempt to break the tension really was.Â  "Come on, Kayura.Â  You've been way too quiet for a long time now.Â  Do something!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The Ancient shook her head regretfully.Â  "No.Â  This is a problem you six must solve on your own.Â  If you can let such things destroy your team, then you are no match for the Dynasty.Â  Discern a solution and then move forward.Â  Only when you are united can you save Miaka and Kenji."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen's eyes widened when Kayura mentioned those two names.Â  A light descended on his features, pushing back the bitter cold for a moment.Â  "Kenjiâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Cye noticed the change in his expression and pounced on the opportunity.Â  "Yes, Rowen.Â  Kenji.Â  If you and Sage don't stop fighting, Kenji will die.Â  We need your help if we ever want to get him back."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Sage slowly lowered his sword, pointing its tip at the floor.Â  "Kenjiâ€¦Â  Iâ€¦Â  I forgot about him for a momentâ€¦Â  Godâ€¦Â  What kind of father am I?"Â  He closed his eyes and let his weapon clatter to the floor.Â  "Alright.Â  Let's find some way to solve all this."Â  He turned to look at Rowen, preparing some kind of speech in his mind, but stopped when he saw the expression on the blue-haired Ronin's face.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  A struggle seemed to be going on beneath the surface of Rowen's face.Â  A light shone in his eyes and tears trickled down his cheeks.Â  The set of his jaw was still firm and impassive, but the genuine sadness and regret that was taking hold of his gaze was slowly creeping across his face.Â  The shadow that had seized control was gradually being forced away.Â  But it wasn't giving up.Â  Rowen lifted the bow and pointed an arrow at Sage.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  His lips moved to form words with which his eyes didn't agree.Â  "Die, Halo."

His fingers relaxed to release the bowstring.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Gentle fingers touched his ankle.Â  "â€¦ Rowen."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He looked down in amazement.Â  Shara was

trying to push herself up with one hand, knowing that her other hand and her legs were completely useless.Â  She had to be in such incredible pain, but she was still trying to save him.Â  Still trying to stop him from doing something he might regret.Â  His conscience, always his conscience.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Kenji needs you, Rowen.Â  You can't ignore him.Â  You can't forget him.Â  No matter how much you may hate Sage, no matter how much you may hate meâ€¦Â  That boy has done nothing to hurt you.Â  That child loves you, Rowen, and I know you love him, too.Â  Don't forsake him.Â  Don't let him
die."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He dropped his arms at his sides and the bow fell to the floor.Â  "â€¦ I won't, Shara.Â  I won't let him go.Â  He's all I have leftâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She shook her head and smiled.Â  "No, hon.Â  Not all.Â  You still have the other Ronins.Â  And you still have me."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The darkness completely faded from his face.Â  "Sharaâ€¦Â  After all I've doneâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I forgive you, Rowen.Â  I forgive
youâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He collapsed by her side and cradled her broken body against him.Â  His fingers tenderly stroked her mane of gold.Â  "I'm sorryâ€¦Â  Iâ€¦ I don't' know what else I canÂ  sayâ€¦Â  Nothing can make up for all of thisâ€¦
Nothing!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "It'll be okay."Â  She flashed him a shaky smile.Â  "What's been done can't be undone.Â  But I can be fixed.Â  Sage has his little miracle power remember?Â  So this'll all be remedied and we can put it behind us."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Sage shook his head and chuckled softly.Â  "I'd completely forgotten about my own power.Â  Good thing you didn't."Â  He kneeled beside Rowen and Shara, trying to ignore the fire that began to burn in his chest at the sight of another man's arms around his wife.Â  "Give her to me, Rowen.Â  I'll take care of her from here."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen stared at him, hearing the meaning behind his words.Â  Sage would forgive their past transgressions, but from now on they would have to stay away from one another.Â  He was claiming Shara as his own, and would no longer allow any closeness between the two.Â

Rowen glanced down at Shara, trying to memorize every feature, trying to summon and tuck all the memories of their past into a corner of his mind.Â  So they'd always be there, even if he couldn't be around her again.Â  No matter what happened, he would always have his memories.Â  She gave him a small smile.Â  He knew she would remember, too.Â  Finally, he raised his eyes to meet Sage's stern gaze.

"No problem, Sage."Â  He gingerly lowered Shara to the floor.

Sage powered down to his subarmor and rubbed his hands together.Â "Alright, Shar.Â  This might not feel so great this time around.Â You've got some serious injuries."

"I trust you, Sage.Â  I'm not afraid."

He gently cradled her broken hand between his palms and closed his eyes.Â  The faint glow started in his palms and flowed into her hand.Â  Shara sighed softly, the sweet drowsiness taking over already.Â  This was no different than the last time.Â  The energy Sage was sharing with her was fulfilling, not at all painful.Â  As the green light soaked into her hand her entire arm tingled pleasantly.Â  She felt herself sinking into a peaceful sleep.

Suddenly a shudder shook her entire body.Â  The gentle warmth was gone, replaced by a burning heat.Â  It _hurt.Â  _Her entire body hurt.Â  From the tips of her toes to the top of her head, the fire spread, lighting every nerve.Â Â  She bit back a scream, not wanting to alarm Sage or the others, as the dead nerves in her lower body all began to awaken once more.Â  The agony was indescribable.Â  It felt like when your foot begins to wake up after you've sat on it too long, but only a thousand times worse.Â  But, bit by agonizing bit, the pain faded as she became able to control and move her muscles again.Â  After what seemed like an eternity, she opened her eyes.

Sage was looking down at her with worried eyes.Â  "Are you okay, Shar?Â  Your body got all stiffâ€¦Â  I was worried something had gone wrong."

She gingerly wiggled her toes and, growing braver, began to work her way up her legs, moving every joint and flexing every muscle.Â "Iâ€¦Â  I think I'm alrightâ€¦Â  But you were right, Sage.Â  That definitely did not feel good."Â  Shara extended her hand to her husband and he helped her try to stand.Â  She wobbled unsteadily for a moment, but soon caught her balance.Â  "But at least it worked."

Rowen stood, a sad expression on his face.Â  "I'm glad you're okay, Sharaâ€¦"

Her eyes met his and she flashed him a warm grin.Â  "I'm always okay.Â  Nothing can ever stop me."

He bit back a laugh and quickly averted his eyes.Â  "Yeah, well.Â  You never know.Â  Anyway, let's get back to trying to rescue Kenji and Miaka, okay?"

Kayura smiled in her usual grim manner.Â  "Yes, let's.Â  Now that you've got your little situation solved, what are you going to do about your loved ones?"

Ryo shot Rowen a sympathetic glance before turning his attention to the Ancient.Â  "Same thing we planned on doing before Eros showed up.Â  We're going to rush in and kick some butt!Â  Get rid of anyone who tries to stop us from saving Miaka and Kenji!Â  Any objections this time, Queen Shara?"Â  He spoke snidely, but winked to show he was only teasing.

She shook her head.Â  "Nope.Â  No objections from me.Â  Sometimes the direct approach is the only way to go."Â  Shara tapped Sage on the shoulder.Â  "Could you do me a favor and go get my staff and sword from the training hall?Â  If we're going in, I definitely need to be prepared."

He nodded and slipped his arm out from around her waist.Â  "Sure thing, Shar.Â  I'll be right back."Â  Sage slipped out the back door and the Warriors watched him from the window as he jogged toward the large building behind the house.

"Well, I better go fix a quick snack before we leave.Â  Can't eat on an empty stomach," Cye chirped cheerfully.Â  "Come and help me, Kento.Â  And, Ryo, why don't you discuss your plan with us and Lady Kayura while I get things ready?"

"I'd rather just wait here, Cye.Â  I don't have much of a plan, anyway."Â  Ryo leaned against the wall.Â  "And I seriously doubt you want Kento anywhere near food that you're trying to get ready for other people.Â  Not unless you want it eaten too soon.."

Cye kicked his friend in the shin.Â  "It would be a _really_ good idea to clue Kayura and the rest of us in, _Ryo_."Â  He tipped his head toward Shara and Rowen and gave the fiery Warrior a meaningful look.

"Oh.Â  _Oh!_Â  Right.Â  Not a problem, Cye.Â  Right behind ya."Â  Ryo quickly followed Cye, Kento, and Kayura into the kitchen.

Shara shook her head and chuckled.Â  "They really need to learn subtlety.Â  Could they have been any _more_ obvious?"

Rowen merely nodded his head.

She frowned and touched his shoulder in concern.Â  "What's the matter, hon?"

He shrugged her off.Â  "Nothing, Shara.Â  I'm just trying to concentrate on what we have to do in a little while.Â  Can't let my mind wander from the battle.Â  This is going to be a very serious fight."

Reaching out once more, she brushed her fingertips across his cheek.Â  "Liar.Â  Most people would buy that explanation, but I know you too well.Â  Something else is bugging you."

Rowen stepped away from her touch, turning his back on her.Â  "Don't touch me.Â  Justâ€¦ stay away, alright?"

Her eyes widened.Â  He'd never said anything like that before.Â  "What is your problem, Rowen?Â  You're acting really weird.Â  You've never told me to stay away from you beforeâ€¦Â  It's always been quite the opposite."

"Are you really that dense, Shara?Â  Didn't you hear what Sage said?"

She thought back, trying to figure out exactly what he was talking about.Â  "â€¦ The only thing he said was that he was worried about me and that he would take care of me."

"Precisely.Â  That's what he said, but he meant something completely different."Â  Rowen shifted his gaze to the ceiling and sighed.Â  "He's going to forgive us for the past.Â  But if anything happens from here on out, he's going to make sure we're very, very sorry.Â  Or at least make sure I am.Â  You're his property now, and I better stay far, far away."

She raised an eyebrow and smiled.Â  "Rowen, Rowen, Rowenâ€¦Â  Tell me, when exactly have I ever let anyone tell me how to live my life?Â  If Sage has difficulty with us being friends, that's his problem.Â  I'm not going to let anyone tell me who I can hang around.Â  Not even my own husband.Â  So."Â  Shara crossed the room and wrapped her arms around his waist in a friendly hug.Â  "Lighten up, doll.Â  No matter what Sage says, we're going to stick around each other.Â  Even if we're only friends.Â  Which, honestly, is all we really should be.Â  We both know that."Â  She leaned her head on his shoulder and looked up at his handsome face.Â  "Alright, Rowen?"

He bowed his head, a smile forcing its way onto his face.Â  "Alright, Sharaâ€¦"Â  Turning to face her, Rowen returned the hug.Â  "We're friends."

She planted a soft kiss on his cheek.Â  "Very good friends.Â  And we that's never gonna change.Â  And you're not gonna let Sage's attitude get to you again, right?"

"Nope.Â  Not a chance."Â  He winked and pulled her close for another hug.Â  "Of course, this ain't gonna be easy.Â  I got used to the secret romance we had going on.Â  Going to be hard to get out of that line of thinking."

She flashed him a mischievous grin.Â  "Well, I'm sure any accidents that happen during the transitional phase will be forgivenâ€¦"Â  Shara stood on tiptoe and pressed her lips against his briefly before releasing him from her embrace.

Rowen laughed.Â  "What happened to the guilty wife complex you had going?"

She tilted her head and pretended to think long and hard about his question.Â  "I guessâ€¦Â  It flew out the window.Â  'Cause, you see, I figured something out."Â  Shara leaned in close once more and whispered softly in his ear.Â  "I'm not perfect.Â  And I don't have to be an angel all the time."Â  She moved back, her wicked grin appearing again.Â  "So if we continue to have a little fun every now and again, as long as we're discreet, I don't see what the problem would be."

He leaned against the wall, an amused look on his face.Â  "I can't say that the offer isn't enticing, Shara, but I don't think I can accept.Â  It wouldn't feel right.Â  I mean, sneaking around behind an unsuspecting husband's back is one thing.Â  To sneak around behind the back of a husband who was kind enough to forgive his wife and best friend's indiscretions is another thing entirely.Â  I owe both of you the chance to have a happy marriage, free of my interference."

Shara pouted, an impish gleam in her eyes.Â  "Awwwâ€¦Â  But that's

not fair!Â  I could've had my cake and eaten it, too."Â  She walked over to stand in front of him, her fingers trailing down his arm and down to his thigh.Â  "And the eating is the fun part."

"Mmmâ€¦Â  Yeah, it definitely always wasâ€¦"Â  Rowen tilted her chin up and caught her lips in another kiss.Â  "But that was in our past, Shara.Â  No matter how much fun we had, it's all over now."

"Yep.Â  All over."Â  She placed a hand on the back of his neck, running her lips across his playfully before sinking into a deep, fervent kiss.Â  Rowen's arms found their way around her waist, one hand lightly running under her shirt to caress the skin of her lower back.Â Â Â  Her fingers tangled in his thick blue hair, enjoying the feeling of the soft strands surrounding them.Â  His rock-hard armor pressed against her as he painfully crushed her body against his.Â  He must have felt her discomfort, because Rowen quickly powered down and sent his armor away.Â  Now she was able to feel every muscle and the heat of his body through the thin material of his shirt.Â  His heart was pounding rapidly, beating in unison with hers.Â  With each second that passed, the kiss became more intense, more desperate, more passionate.Â  They were in serious danger of being caught, but the thought never crossed either of the pair's minds.Â  They were caught up in the torrent of emotions that had swept them away from the real world, and there was no getting them back.

_Sharaâ€¦_Â  Rowen's voice in her mind was more of a moan than anything else.Â  _God, I love you.Â  I can't give you up.Â  I can't give up what I feel._

_No one's asking you to, silly._Â  Even her thoughts seemed out of breath as their physical bodies continued to kiss and grope.Â  _All we need now is to be more careful.Â  And ignore silly things like guilt and doubt.Â  There's no denying our feelings any more, hon.Â  I'm sick of trying.Â  _

_Shara, Iâ€”_

_Shut up.Â  You've said enough.Â  It's my turn.Â  Rowen.Â  I didn't know it was possible, but I'm completely, absolutely, without a single doubtâ€”_

**_I hate to interrupt._**

Shara almost fainted from shock.Â  _L-Lady Kayura!_

Yes.Â  If you are going to try this foolish mission, I suggest that you two separate quickly.Â  Sage is almost in a position from which he could see you.Â  If he does, the entire mission will be destroyed.Â  Cease yourâ€¦ activitiesâ€¦ immediately!

Yes, ma'amâ€¦ Shara sighed softly and pulled out of Rowen's mind.Â  "Spoilsport."

Rowen dropped one last kiss on the side of her neck before releasing the blonde woman from his embrace.Â  He quickly called for his armor again and crossed the room to stand as far away from her as possible.Â  "There's always another time, Shara.Â  Always more time."

"You better make sure to find the time, boy."Â  She straightened her

blouse and sat in one of the chairs of the dining room.Â  Shara glanced out the window just in time to see Sage approach the back door and let himself in.

"Got 'em, sweetie."Â  He walked over to her and placed the long snakewood staff and her slim Chinese sword on the table.Â  "Now all we have to do is get Kayura to open the Gate, and we're off!"

"Yup."Â  She stood and kissed her husband's cheek quickly.Â  "Kayura went into the kitchen to listen to Ryo's plan and maybe help gather some food.Â  Though I doubt they're having much luck with the food, since Kento's in there with them.Â  I can go get her, if you want."Â  Without waiting for a reply, Shara glided into the kitchen to retrieve the foursome.Â

Rowen looked up at Sage, a tense smile on his face.Â  "Hey.Â  Sage.Â  Look, manâ€¦Â  I've gotta know if there's any hard feelings between us."

Sage chuckled darkly.Â  "I'm sure there will be some for quite a while.Â  But I'll get over it, Rowen.Â  What's done is done.Â  No use in freaking out about it, no?Â  As long as you two have come to your sensesâ€¦"

"We definitely have, Sage.Â  Definitely."Â  He glanced down, hiding a secret smile.Â  Just not the way you would have liked.

"Good.Â  Then we won't have a problem."Â  Sage looked toward the kitchen door as Shara and the others emerged.Â  "Are we all ready to go?"

"Unfortunately, I didn't get to prepare any sort of a snack to have before we depart."Â  Cye smiled affectionately at the orange-clad Ronin.Â  "Kento managed to eat everything I made the moment I took my eye off of it.Â  Guess we'll be fighting on empty stomachs."

"We'll live."Â  Ryo grinned and tapped Kayura on the shoulder.Â  "Well, get that magic of yours working and bring us a Gate!Â  Time to get started."

She nodded and raised her staff, moving it so the golden rings clanged together.Â  "When you rescue Miaka and Kenji, summon me with your minds and I'll bring you all back here.Â  Good luck, Ronins."Â  The Ancient said a few words and a large Gate appeared above Cye's dining room table.Â  "There is your door.Â  Return quickly and safely."

The six friends looked at each other.Â

"High-fives for good luck?" Shara chirped brightly.

The other five Warriors shrugged.

"Sure."Â  Kento grinned.Â  "Why not?"

Six hands met in mid-air, five armored and one bare white hand.Â

"Let's do it!" Ryo crowed.

The Ronins stood shoulder-to-shoulder.Â  Kento, Cye, Sage, Shara, Rowen, and Ryo.Â  Comrades.Â  The hope of the earth.Â  Together, united, and strong.Â  They stepped through the Gate and vanished into the darkness.

AN:Â  You know what?Â  I actually thought this was going to be a short chapter.Â  Certainly didn't turn out that way, huh?Â  Anyway.Â  Odd developments, no?Â  Of course, things are guaranteed to get odder.Â  â€¦ And, for once, I have absolutely nothing to say.Â  Wow.Â  Guess I better get started on my next chapter.Â  Stay tuned!

## 7. Lost Innocence

**Disclaimer:** *yawns* I don't own the Ronin Warriors, or any other organization and characters associated to them in the anime. I forgot the name of the guy who owns them, or I'd give him the credit he's due. Miaka, Shara, Kenji, and Rime are all mine.

**Warning:** I never, ever thought I'd have to write one of these. I know the previous parts of my story have been very PG, but I'm about to dive a bit into the world of R. This chapter contains a slightly graphic, and rather disturbing, scene. Rape, to be precise. Anyone who is offended by that act, or is rather squeamish, I suggest you turn back now. Okay. You've been warned.

**Lost Innocence**

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara looked around the dark territory, at the large stone and wood Shinto shrine-style buildings, at the legions of Dynasty soldiers who marched around diligently. She stared in shock at the black, starless sky with its dark reddish-purple clouds and strange streaks of lightning. This was the realm of the Dynasty. A foreboding, terrible place that made her shudder in horror. She glanced at the other Warriors, expecting to see the same revulsion and distress on their faces. But they were all merely smiling, albeit rather grimly. This place was nothing new to them. The Ronins had been here before, and knew what to expect. They weren't new to this, like she was.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "How do you get used to this place?" Shara unsuccessfully tried to shake away the fright that had gripped her. "It's horrible!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Eh, it's not so bad." Ryo gave her a reassuring smile. "Lots of space. Pretty cool buildings. Plenty of mindless cronies to beat up. Sure, the view is a little gloomy, but you get used to it after a while. All in all, not a bad place to have a summer home."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She chuckled, her dark mood effectively broken. "Yeah, right. I'm sure this area will be on the best-selling real estate list this year." Shara tightened her grasp on her wooden staff and made sure her sword was in its sheath and firmly tied to her waist. "Alright, boys. So when does the fun begin?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Sage nodded at a swarm of soldiers coming

toward them from the right. "I'd say right about now. Too bad it'll be way too easy." Sighing, he lifted his sword and faced the approaching army.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Thunderbolt Cut!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â A weak beam of green light trickled from his sword, not even traveling three feet before it vanished. The green Warrior staggered and fell with a small cry, the Armor of Halo vanishing when he struck the ground.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Sage!" Shara fell beside him and shook him urgently. "What's wrong? What happened?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â His eyes fluttered open briefly. "â€¦ Weakâ€¦ energyâ€¦. I thinkâ€¦ from healing youâ€¦ Must'veâ€¦ sapped my powerâ€¦ Justâ€¦ gimme a few minutesâ€¦" Sage's body went limp in his wife's arms, the last traces of his strength extinguished by the effort of those few sentences.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Just great. Only been here five minutes, and one of us is down already," Ryo grumbled. "Oh, well. Guess we have to make do."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Let me. I haven't gotten to do enough so far." Kento raised his Naginata and waved it in the air before plunging it into the ground.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Iron Rock Crusher!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The earth split from the point of impact and a great crevasse rushed toward the Dynasty minions. Giant rocks, boulders really, flew through the air and struck the unsuspecting legions, crushing them with their incredible weight. The fighters who were unfortunate enough to dodge the rocks were swallowed by the gaping fissure and incinerated by the molten rock that churned below. Soon there was nothing left of the Dynasty force.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Yeah!" Kento pumped his fist in the air. "That completely _rocked_!" They all groaned at the terrible pun.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "You won't be allowed to fight if you keep making jokes like that," Ryo warned his friend teasingly. He glanced over his shoulder to check on Shara and Sage and swore under his breath.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Oh, boy. Looks like trouble."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Coming over a hill was an army of soldiers that was ten-times larger than the one Kento had destroyed. Leading the troops was a tall man in navy and powder blue armor. His thick black hair ruffled in the wind and a scythe gleamed in his right hand.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara's breath caught in her throat. "Itâ€¦ It's him! That's the man who kidnapped Kenji!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen's head snapped around. "Him, huh? Good. Come on, boys. Let's teach these clowns a lesson they'll never forget."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The other three chimed in their agreement and, together, the four Warriors charged up the hill, leaving Shara to take care of Sage. In just a few seconds, the sound of metal against metal rang through the air as the battle began.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara grabbed her husband and tried to drag him out of the way of the violence. "You pick the worst times to check out on us, darlin'. I hope the guys can manage without you." She sat by Sage's side and rubbed his hand between her palms, trying to wake him up. When that didn't work, she began slapping his cheeks, lightly at first, but with increasing intensity. .But he still showed no signs of reviving.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara turned her attention to the battle, watching her friends struggling to stop the advancement of the Dynasty troops. They definitely had their hands full. Ryo was dodging dozens of attacks, countering each with a whirl of silver slashes. Kento and Cye stood back-to-back, surrounded by a circle of downed minions the two had managed to destroy. Rowen had distanced himself from the action and was firing arrow after arrow into the mob. They were doing fantastically well. But still the soldiers kept coming. For every soldier felled, two more quickly took his place. There seemed to be no end to the resources of the Dynasty.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I wish I could do _something_â€¦" Shara cursed her own impotence. She turned back to Sage and started shaking him. "You've gotta get up! They need you overâ€”" She cut off her sentence as she saw her husband's eyelids begin to flicker. "Oh! Sage!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He stared at her, his voice groggy. "â€¦ Sharâ€¦ Lookâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Her eyes narrowed in concern. "â€¦ What do you want, sweetie?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Behindâ€¦ lookâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Saâ€”" An arm snaked around her throat, choking off the rest of her words. She scratched at the arm, trying to loosen it, but it was shielded from her nails by dark blue armor and clenched too tightly to be budged. The person clutching her shifted slightly and Shara felt icy breath on her ear.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Hello again, Shara. The Empress is looking forward to meeting you."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Her eyes widened in surprise. She recognized that voice. It was the same chilling tone of the Warlord she had met before. The man who had kidnapped her son. Shara glanced at her husband with pleading eyes, begging him to help. He was struggling to sit up, but was obviously in no condition to assist her in any

manner. She dropped her hand from the Warlord's arm and groped for her sword. Just as she closed her hand on it and was slowly pulling it from its sheath, the Warlord ripped her belt from her waist.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Naughty girl. You shouldn't play with dangerous toys like that." He jerked her to her feet and laughed. "Time for a little trip."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She closed her eyes, concentrating all her energy into a mental shout that would hopefully reach Rowen. _Rowen! Help me! The Warlordâ€¦ I don't knowâ€¦ He's got meâ€¦ Pleaseâ€¦ Helpâ€¦_

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Rowen's head snapped around, startled to hear the desperate voice in his mind. "Sharaâ€¦?" He saw the armored man clutching her and finally realized why she had called out. The Ronin turned away from the battle and sprinted toward the struggling woman, desperate to save her.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The Warlord glanced up as the Warrior approached, smiled coldly, and then vahished, along with his captive, in a flash of silver-blue light.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Rowen fell to his knees and swore under his breath. Shara was gone, and there was nothing more he could do. Tearfully, the Ronin hurried back to the battle.

---

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The Warlord threw his prisoner on the floor of the brightly lit room and chuckled at the sound of the thud of her body. "I'd like to stay and chat, but I have a battle to win. You'll be attended to shortly. Don't try even think of escaping." He vanished once more, leaving Shara alone.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She pushed herself up from the floor, amazed by the soft forest green carpet underneath her fingertips. As she gazed around the room, her astonishment only grew. The walls were white and ecorated with lovely paintings of nature and animals. Beautiful wooden beams that added an old-fashioned feel to the room adorned the high ceiling. A lovely mahogany dresser and armoire added to the elegance of the space. But the centerpiece of the area was obviously the majestic antique bed its delicate lace canopy. Shara reached out timidly and touched the intricate cloth. It was real and beautiful. She ran her hands down the soft dark green quilt and silky white satin sheets. Also real, also beautiful. Shara shook her head, astounded by her surroundings. After seeing the darkness of the Dynasty realm, this room seemed completely out of place.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Lovely, isn't it?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She whirled around at the sound of the soft voice. Her gaze fell upon an incredibly handsome man with wild blue hair and bewitching eyes the deep blue-green of the oceans. His face was strong and proud, his lips curved softly in a sensuous smile. Long, muscled legs stretched out in front of him, clad luxuriously in black silk pants. His bare chest gleamed in the overhead light, toned

and perfect. The man stood and began walking toward her, each movement graceful and fluid.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "We created this room just for you. Did Rime tell you that?" He looked at her expectantly before answering his own question. "No, I suppose not. Rime is a good Warlord, but he isn't really the best conversationalist." The man sat on the bed and gestured for her to sit beside him. "Please. Have a seat. There is much I have to discuss with you."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She hesitated briefly. This man was obviously a member of the Dynasty, but his manner was completely different than any of the Warlords or other soldiers she had met. He reminded her of someone, but she couldn't quite figure out whom. Shara finally decided to sit on the bed, but picked a place several feet away from him.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Not very trusting, are you? Ah, well. It doesn't matter." He leaned back against the pillows and flashed her a charming smile. "Would you like to hear a story? See, there's this rumor going around about how a female wearing any Armor is a sign of the future arrival of the ultimate power. It seems that only two women throughout all of history have been able to wear the Armors. No one knows why, but the powers of the Armors have always been given to men. Anyway, Lady Kayura was the first woman to wear any of the Armors. Hers was given to her by Anubis, but if it wasn't for her abilities as an Ancient, she would most likely be unable to use the Armor. And you are the second, Shara. But you are very, very special, you see. For you were born a Ronin, which is something that has never happened before. Your ability to use Armors is not a side effect of some other power you were born with, such as in Kayura's case, but instead it comes naturally. This makes you a bit of a freak, for lack of a better word."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She shook her head, confused. "Iâ€¦ don't understand why any of this is important. So I'm a girl. Big deal."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Oh, but it certainly is a 'big deal.' The Dynasty is abuzz with the fear of what kind of power the child of two Ronins might possess. It seems that somewhere in the most ancient texts is written a legend of an unstable Armor that can be either used for good or evil. Or at least that's what our scholars believe. There are no specifics on the subject of how someone can make it appear, or what exactly it looks like, but now everyone around here is wondering if the child of two people who are capable of using Armors could use it. This is the first time this theory could ever be tested."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "That's why you kidnapped Kenjiâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Yes, precisely. Unfortunately, the child was too weak and our attempts to summon the Armor by using him as a catalyst resulted in his untimely death. An unfortunate setback for our experiment. The Empress came up with a theory for why the boy didn't survive. He is the son of a rather weak member of the Ronins, compared to his friends Rowen and Ryo, that is, and of a Warrior who no longer possesses her Armor. There is nothing to be done about the second factor, but if a stronger man who possesses an Armor were to

have a child with that woman, perhaps the new child will be strong enough to gain the power of the legendary
Armor."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She moved to stand, already sensing the reason for his presence, the reason for the beautiful bedroom.
"Noâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Yes, my dear girl. The Empress doesn't believe any of your fellow Ronins would be strong enough to conceive such a child. So she has left the honor to her strongest Warlord." He inclined his head in a gracious nod, as if Shara had just paid him a compliment. "That, of course, is me."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "No!" She jumped off the bed and ran across the room, searching for a door, a window, any way out. "You
can't!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He stood and glided toward her, the soft smile still on his face. "Now, now. It isn't anything to be afraid of. It certainly won't be terrible for you, unless you make it that way. Just give in and things will be much easier on you." The man extended his hand and placed it on her trembling
shoulder.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She shuddered at his touch and slapped his hand away. "Get your hands off of me. There's absolutely no way I'd give myself to an evil monster like you!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  His beautiful eyes darkened in anger. "Monster? Hardly. I merely do what I am told. I'm a servant of my Empress, and must do her bidding. You understand, of course." His hand shot out and gripped her wrist painfully. "There's no use in trying to run. This room is completely sealed off from the outside world. And don't try to fight me, either. I'm much stronger than you'll ever be."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She tried to shake off his hand, but it was impossible. Then he pulled her against him, holding her so she felt the bones of his arms on the bones of her ribs, her legs jerked tight against his, and his mouth on hers. She did not know if she lay passive in his arms for a moment from the shock of feeling his skin against her or if terror had immediately overtaken her body and forced her to twist her body in an attempt to escape. She tried to tear herself away. Her blows fell on arms that did not seem to feel them. Her fists beat against his shoulders and face, but nothing seemed to faze the man.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He moved one hand, took her wrists, pinned them behind her and under his arm. The movement wrenched her shoulder blades and a flash of pain washed over Shara. She twisted her head back. She felt his hand beginning to undo the buttons of her blouse. She struggled fiercely, and managed to tear herself
away.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara fell back against the dresser. Her hands clasped the edge of it behind her, her eyes wide and shapeless in terror. He was laughing soundlessly, an excited glint in his eyes. Perhaps he had released her on purpose. He stood, his legs apart, his arms hanging at his sides. She glanced around the room once more,

futilely hoping a door had miraculously appeared in the last minute. He took a step forward and her shoulders drooped in despair. She huddled closer to the table, trying to get any kind of protection possible. He approached and placed his hands on her shoulders. She was pinned to the wall. One hand released her briefly and he finished tearing open her blouse.

"Stop! Please!" she screamed, but his only response was to grip the inside of her elbows, pinning her arms back.

He brought his lips to her nipples, moving quickly from one to the other and back again. She closed her eyes and tried to deny this was happening. Her confused body responded to his caresses, stirring in ways few had ever made it. But her mind screamed for her to fight and try to break away. It was like sinking into warm quicksand; for a moment, it felt good, but it only promised trouble.

She continued to squirm under his pincerlike fingers. His tongue drew a line from one breast to another and then he began to lower his body. His lips ran over her stomach and down to the waist of her pants. He gripped her wrists together with one hand and used the other to unfasten her jeans and slide them off her hips and down her slender legs. They landed in a denim puddle at her feet, soon followed by a smaller silky puddle of green. He looked up at her, his eyes wild with desire. The glint in them was enough to make her heart race even faster, to pound even more violently.

Unable to get around him, unable to escape in any way, she simply covered her eyes as he released her arms to embrace her thighs and draw them to his face. Her legs folded up and she slid down the wall to the floor.

His breathing was hard and heavy. All Shara could do was cry as his hands moved over her body. Exploring. Caressing.

His hands were suddenly removed from her body. She removed her hands from her eyes for a moment and saw him lowering his pants. The sight sent a bolt of fear up her spine. It reawakened the fighter in her and she fought like an animal, scratching and clawing at his face. But he seized her wrists and turned her until she was on her back on the soft carpet. In one swift motion he slipped himself between her legs.

Shara wrenched one hand free and pummeled his head with a flurry of blows. He didn't even acknowledge them. Instead he moved himself into a more comfortable position, his lips catching the soft flesh of her breasts as he nibbled his way over her bosom.

Suddenly she felt his hardness pressing itself firmly against her until he forced himself inside. It drove into her tight, resisting flesh, which tore and bled.

She fought even harder, but she made no sound. She did not call for help, not wanting to give him the satisfaction of seeing her break down that completely. She could hear the blows she delivered to him. He only gasped with pleasure. She felt the blood beating in her throat, the hatred, the helpless terror. She felt the hatred in his hands, his hands that moved all over her body. She fought in a last outburst. Then the sudden pain shot up through her body and she screamed. Then she lay still. She lay on her back, as he had left

her, not moving. She felt empty.

Shara didn't move for a long time. She didn't even notice when the man rose and left her. She was still caught up in the horror of the experience. A wonderful act that could be performed in tenderness, as a bond of love, had been degraded into nothing more than a symbol of humiliation and conquest. Not as love, but as defilement. None of his movements had held one shred of tenderness. Shara wanted to remain cold, untouched by the thing done to her body. But she was screaming inside.

She had felt him shaking with the agony of an unbearable pleasure. She knew that she had given that to him, her body. The thought brought her to tears.

After quite some time, Shara finally raised her head and looked at him. He lay still across the bed, his head propped up casually on the white pillows. She heard his soft, shallow breaths. She watched him get up, walk over to the chair he had been sitting in at the beginning, tip an imaginary hat to her, and then vanish from the room.

Shara slowly sat up and wrapped her arms around her bare chest. She heard a sound that came from somewhere within her. The dry, short sound of a sob. But she was not crying. Her eyes were held paralyzed, dry and open. A jolt ran down her throat to her stomach. She stood awkwardly, doubled over, clutching her stomach. She found that she couldn't stop shaking. The need to take a bath was overwhelming, to sit in scalding hot water, allowing it to wash away the lingering feeling of his hands on her skin. She staggered over to the bed, wanting to draw the covers over her head and never come out again. Shara collapsed on the bed and welcomed the blackness that rapidly descended.

**AN:** â€¦ I don't even know what to say. I don't know what on Earth possessed me to write thisâ€¦ Ugh. I've even depressed myself. I can't think of anything to write for the next chapter 'cause this one downed me too muchâ€¦ Someone remind me to never do anything like this again. Please.

## 8. Pain of Reuniting

**Disclaimer:** The Ronin Warriors are not my property. I still dearly wish they were, but can't have everything I want, no? Kenji, Miaka, Shara, Eros, Rime, and the Empress are mine. If anyone ever actually wants to use any of 'em, you gotta ask me first.

**The Pain of Reuniting**

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She awoke on a cold stone floor. Shara looked at her hands, her wrists, and the dark bruises that were forming. Reminders. Horrid reminders of what had happened. She sat up, wrapping her arms around herself and rocking back and forth, wondering why tears wouldn't come. After a while, her mind finally emerged from its fog long enough to register that she was now wearing a familiar black jacket over her naked body. Her head shot up and she looked wildly around the rest of the room, fearing who else might be with her.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "You looked cold," a soft voice said.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara turned to look over her shoulder. Miaka leaned against a blank stone wall, not three feet away. She couldn't believe she hadn't noticed her before. A shackle was on her right ankle, chaining the lovely redhead to the wall. A five-foot chain gave Miaka plenty of slack so she could move about, but very effectively prevented her escape.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Miakaâ€¦" Shara was relieved at first, but then was stricken by a horrible thought. Her friend must have seen the state of her body when she had dressed her in the jacket. She must know what had happened. Suddenly Shara was ashamed to even look at Miaka and quickly averted her gaze.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "You know." It wasn't a question, only a statement of fact.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Yes." Shara heard the rustle of the chain as Miaka walked across the floor. She soon felt a light touch on her shoulder. "I know. But you don't need to hide from me, Shara. Whatever happenedâ€¦ None of it was your fault. There's no way you could've stopped it or gotten away. Please don't blame yourself."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Maybe I shouldâ€¦ I let it happen. Maybe there's something I could have doneâ€¦ something I didn't tryâ€¦ Maybe I just didn't fight hard enough. Maybe I even deserved itâ€¦" She was shaking even harder now. "Godâ€¦ How am I going to face Sage? He'll be so disgustedâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Miaka wrapped the trembling woman in a gentle embrace. "No, he won't be. He'll understand that you were helpless. He'll understand that it wasn't your idea. Don't let any of that worry you."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "How can he understand? How can _anyone_ understand?" She shoved her friend away. "Nothing you can say will make this any better! I'll always remember. I'll always know what I allowed some man to do to me." She scrubbed at her arms with her fingernails. "God! I can still feel him! It won't go away! His handsâ€¦ His handsâ€¦ I can still feel them!" Shara scratched at her arms until the skin tore and bled.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Shara! Shara! Stop that!" Miaka grabbed her friend's wrists and held them firmly. "Pleaseâ€¦ It's overâ€¦ He can't hurt you any more."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The blonde woman struggled for a moment, but soon her body went limp. When Miaka released her hands, she pressed them to her face, as if to hide the tears that should be flowing. Dry sobs shook her body, but still not one tear would fall from her eyes. She pulled back her hands and gave her friend a miserable look. "Why can't I cry, Miaka? Why? It isn't fair! All he tookâ€¦ he took my tears away, too."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Miaka paused, trying to figure out what to say. "You're justâ€¦ in shock, Shara. Give it a little time. You'll be okay." She smiled reassuringly at her forlorn friend and offered

her hand. "Come on. Together, I know we can find a way out of here. Then we can go kick that bastard's butt."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Meekly, Shara nodded and took Miaka's hand. The two stood and looked around the dark dungeon, searching for any possible escape route. There seemed to be an area of darker shadow on the far wall that could possibly be a door, but there was no way to be certain. Miaka thought for a moment and gave her friend's hand a gentle squeeze. "Okay, here's the plan. First we have to figure out how to get this thing off my leg. Then we go check and see if that's a door and bust our way out of here." She glanced down at her ankle and frowned. "Now. How do we get this thing off?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara gazed down at it, a blank look on her face. "Iâ€¦ I don't knowâ€¦ We don't have a keyâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "No, guards don't generally give keys to their prisoners so they can escape," Miaka teased. "Soâ€¦ Hmmâ€¦ I don't suppose you have a hairpin or anything. That would be way too convenient."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara shook her head slowly. "Noâ€¦ I don't even think I own oneâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I wouldn't doubt it." Miaka laughed. "Well, guess we'll just have to figure something else out."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara fiddled with the zipper on one of the jacket's pockets. "I don't have any ideasâ€¦ I can't do anythingâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Jeez, you're no help today." Miaka gave her friend a quick hug. "That's okay. I can come up with something." She patted her own pockets then, finding nothing, examined the jacket Shara was wearing. "Heyâ€¦ I wonder. If we could tear off one of those zippers, it might be long enough to trip the tumblers in the lock." She shrugged. "Well, it's worth a try anyway. C'mere, Shara."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She stepped obediently to Miaka's side. The redhead grabbed a zipper on one of the pockets, twisting and tugging on it until it came free. "Alright! Now let's see if this is going to work." She kneeled on the cold stone floor and inserted the rather large silver rectangle into the keyhole of her shackle. Miaka turned and twirled the zipper for several minutes before she heard the satisfying click of the tumblers finally being pushed back. The shackle fell loose from her ankle and clattered noisily on the floor.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Yes! Now we can get out of here!" She grabbed Shara and tugged on her arm. "Come on! Let's go!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She yanked her arm free and shook her head violently, her eyes wild. "No! I'm safe here! If I go out thereâ€¦ He might find me again! I can't go! I won't! I'm tooâ€¦ too scaredâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Shara, you can't be afraid! Not forever. And if you don't cut this out, I don't know if you'll ever be okay again!" Miaka gave her an incredulous look. "What happened to the brave girl who took down a Dynasty emperor all by herself? Who always stands up for her friends? Who came to the Dynasty realm to save her son and friend, even though she had lost her powers? Where did she go, Shara?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The blonde woman slumped against the wall, her emerald eyes dull and flat. "She's goneâ€¦ She was taken far awayâ€¦ Or maybe she was merely an illusionâ€¦ Maybe this is the real meâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Miaka leaned beside her, a soft smile on her face. "No, I can't believe that. No illusion can be as brave as you are. FaÃ§ades are never that strong. That courageous girl is still in you, somewhere. All you have to do is find her again."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "I don't know if I canâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Sure you can! All it's going to take is a little time." She glanced at the possible door once again. "Unfortunately, time is not something we have a lot of right now. We've gotta get out of here and find the guys. Then we can save Kenji."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "No. We can't save Kenjiâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "What are you talking about? Of course we can! Nothing can beat the guys." Miaka smiled confidently, and gave Shara's arm a tug. "So let's go!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Noâ€¦ I know the guys might be able to winâ€¦ But no one can save Kenjiâ€¦ Theyâ€¦ they told me thatâ€¦ thatâ€¦ he diedâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Miaka's eyes widened. "Noâ€¦ They must have been lying. They wouldn't kidnap Kenji just so they could kill him!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara's face was empty and cold. "They didn't try to kill himâ€¦ They were trying to summon some kind of legendary Armor by using himâ€¦ and he wasn't strong enoughâ€¦ So he diedâ€¦ And then they sent thatâ€¦ that Warlordâ€¦ after meâ€¦ So I could have another childâ€¦ a stronger oneâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Oh, is that so?" Miaka clenched her fists in anger. "Alright. Then we'll pay them back. We'll kill them all for what they've done!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara looked up, a light sparking in her eyes for the first time. "Do you think we can?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Miaka nodded forcefully. "You bet we can. Once we get together with the guys, nothing could stop the seven of us."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara stood up straight and started toward the far wall. "Then let's
hurry."

---

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "To your left!" Rowen yelled. Sage quickly spun and struck down the three enemies that had been trying to sneak up on him. He thanked him by slicing the soldier behind Rowen in half. The blue-haired Ronin nodded his thanks and dashed back to take position on top of a hill, striking down the minions who tried to stop him with deadly kicks and strikes with his hands. When he reached the apex of the hill, Rowen leaped into the air with his bow in hand.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Arrow Shockwave!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The arrow struck the ground, sending out a massive wave of golden energy. It struck a large portion of the Dynasty soldiers and turned them all into dust on impact. The wave continued to flow outwards, disintegrating some, wounding others.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Yeah!" He pumped his fist in the air and grinned. The battle was going much better now that all five of the Warriors were strong enough to fight. They were beating back the Dynasty's forces, foot by foot. At this rate, they would be close enough to the main castle to run inside and try to find Miaka, Kenji, and Shara in only a matter of minutes. The legions of Dynasty soldiers began to withdraw, apparently sensing their imminent defeat.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Then he appeared at the head of his retreating troops. The tall black-haired man with the scythe. The Warlord who had kidnapped Shara. Rowen's blood began to burn with anger and he dashed down the hill in a full sprint, aiming for the Warlord. The man saw his approach and froze him, literally, in his tracks with one wave of his scythe. Rowen couldn't move, his feet frozen firmly to the ground.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Agh! I'm going to kill you!" He lifted his bow and placed an arrow in position.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Unlikely." The man raised his scythe and pointed it at Rowen's arms. They were immediately covered in deep blue ice, stopping him before he could release the bowstring. "My ice is impenetrable. So any attempts to escape would be
futile."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Now, I wouldn't say thatâ€¦ Flare Up
Now!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Blazing flames swept over the Warlord, knocking him flat on his back, and continued on to Rowen, melting the ice that covered half of his body. Ryo landed beside his friend, his swords at the ready.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Hey, there, buddy. Looked like you needed a bit of help."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen grinned. "Naw, I was handling it just fine. But thanks anyway."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Not a problem." Ryo switched his gaze to the Warlord as he rose to his feet. "Hey, you. What did you do with Kenji and Shara?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He sneered at the Ronin. "That's none of your business, Wildfire. Even so, you won't live to see them again."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Oh, come on. I just knocked you flat on your butt with one blow. Do you really think you can stand up to our combined attacks?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I am the mighty Rime! Second most powerful of all of the Dynasty's Warlords! I'll crush you with the greatest of ease! Prepare to die, wretched Ronins!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Ryo turned to Rowen and rolled his eyes. "Typical villain. Egotistical and corny. They must have a script that every villain has to memorize before he gets his villainy license." He returned to speaking to the Warlord. "Okay, Rime, was it? Tell you what. You tell us where our friends are and we won't kill you. Sound fair to you?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rime was trembling with anger. "Stop with your senseless drivel! I'm a Warlord and deserve respect!" He lifted his scythe and pointed it at Ryo. "Icy Death Grip!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The icy claw formed around the fiery Warrior, squeezing the air from his lungs. He let out a strangled cry, trying to break free of the crushing ice. But it held firm, even withstanding the natural heat of the Armor of Wildfire. He soon slumped unconscious. Rowen beat at the claw with his bow without result.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The Warlord threw his head back and laughed. "Now let's see you melt my ice!" He pointed his scythe at Rowen and ice covered his feet, beginning to creep up his legs toward his waist.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Hey!" Rowen brought his bow down on the ice, but it wouldn't crack. "Ummâ€¦ guys? Little help, please!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Cye and Kento broke away from pursuing the dark gray-armored soldiers and hurried back to help their friends. The Warlord merely pointed his weapon at them and they immediately became covered in the same crawling ice as Rowen. Sage rushed over to try and assist the four, but he, too, was frozen in his tracks.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Um, this is definitely not good." Kento watched the ice spreading from his calves to his thighs to his hips. "Now what?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I don't have any ideas!" Cye's bright blue

eyes were wide with alarm.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Well, somebody better come up with something quick!" The frozen prison was making its way up Rowen's chest and across his shoulders, closing in rapidly on his neck.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Inferno! Our only chance!" Sage yelled. "Everyone! Send your energy to Ryo quickly!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Armor of Torrent!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Armor of Hardrock!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Armor of Strata!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Armor of Halo!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The four Ronins Armors emitted beams of light, pale blue, orange, dark blue, and green, and the energy streaked toward the unconscious Warrior and combined with his red armor. A flash of brilliant light saturated the sky, showing the Dynasty what daylight looked like for a few seconds. The ice claw cracked with the rush of heat that accompanied the appearance of the white Armor. It suddenly exploded in a shower of silver-blue shards, carpeting the ground with ice. Ryo stood in the middle of a blaze of flames, the gleaming Armor of Inferno reflecting the image of the fire. His blue eyes held swirls of fire. Two silver katanas gleamed in his hands. He faced the Warlord, his head raised high.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Bring it on."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Rime lowered his scythe, icy eyes wide with amazement. "That'sâ€¦ that's impossible. No one has ever broken free of my Grip!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Yeah, well, there's a first time for everything." Ryo leapt into the air, raising his swords high and placing their ends together. "Time to burn! Rage of Inferno!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Red-hot flames raced from the sky, bathing the surrounding area in fire. Everything in a 500-yard radius was saturated with the burning fire. The ice covering the Ronins evaporated instantly. The cold Warlord was covered with the brilliant blaze and incinerated. Ryo landed nimbly and smiled at his fellow Warriors.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Shall we go find the others?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Rowen stepped up beside his friend and grinned. "You bet." He raced toward the castle, the others following closely behind.

---

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Careful, careful!" Miaka hissed urgently. "There's two soldiers coming this way. Quick, quick, duck into that

room."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The two women darted into a darkened room, waiting quietly until the guards walked by. Miaka peeked her head out of the doorway and looked quickly in both directions.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Okay, all clear. Let's go."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The duo continued sneaking down the corridors, hiding to avoid soldiers when necessary, as they had been doing for at least the last hour. Miaka finally came to a stop and leaned against a door.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Jeez! This place is just too freakin' big!" She glanced down one hall and then down another. "Okay, which one now?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Mutely Shara pointed down the left hall.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Alrighty. If you say so. Let's go." Just as she started forward, a door farther down the left hall exploded in a cloud of splinters. Three Dynasty minions shot through the opening and slammed into the opposite wall. Then two more men jumped into the room, their weapons held high. One held a broadsword; the other, a pair of katanas.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Miaka raced toward the man in white. "Ryo! Ryo!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He spun to face her and ripped off his helmet, eyes shining with tears of joy. "Miaka! You're alive! Thank God!" He swept her up in a close embrace, burying his face in her long hair. "I thought I'd lost youâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "I'm not that easy to get rid ofâ€¦" She wrapped her arms around his neck and lost herself in a deep kiss.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Shara!" Removing his helmet, Sage ran over to her, sweeping her off her feet and showering her face with kisses. "You're okay! I was so worried when Rowen told us you had been kidnapped." He frowned when she didn't respond in her normal cheery manner. "Hey, Sharâ€¦? Is something the matter?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She simply stared at him, her face void of any expression.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He finally noticed the way she was dressed. He knew immediately that something horrible must have happened. His wife did like to run around in skimpy outfits sometimes, but she had never wandered around in nothing but a black leather jacket before. And the jacket wasn't even hers. Sage recognized it as a present Ryo had given Miaka on their second anniversary. His eyes darkened as a thought crossed his mind.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Sharaâ€¦? Didâ€¦ did something happen to

youâ€¦? Did someoneâ€¦ Did theyâ€¦" He couldn't bring himself to say the words.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She looked at the wall, her face growing paler and paler. Shara didn't do anything after that for quite some time. When she finally spoke, her voice was quiet and hoarse.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "So. I was right. You don't understandâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "What? What do you want me to understand?" He gazed at her in concern.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Put me down, Sage."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Sharâ€¦? Whatâ€¦ what happened to you?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Put me down."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "What happened, Shara?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "What do you _think_ happened?!" she suddenly exploded. "You know, don't you? And you just can't bring yourself to say it. Because if you do, that will make it real, and then the world won't be so perfect any more. I won't be perfect any more. Not good enough for a noble Warrior like you. You'll find me disgusting, and that will be the end of everything! So go on! Tell me you hate me! Tell me you never want to see me again!" She writhed in his arms like a wild animal. "And let me go!"

Shara stared at him, her eyes wild with some emotion Sage couldn't identify. Something close to fear and self-hate. Silently, he did as she requested, lowering her feet to the floor so she could stand. He stood still for a moment, gathering his thoughts.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I could never say that to you," Sage said with a slow shake of his head. "You know I love you, Shara. How can you think that anything could tear us apart? No matter what may have beenâ€¦ doneâ€¦ to you, that fact will never change. I'll always be here for you, and I'll always think you're the most beautiful, the bravest, the sweetest, and the most caring woman on this planet, or any other, for that matter." He took her hand in his, powering down until he was wearing his normal clothing. "It's okay, Shara. I don't care what happened. I don't care if you wereâ€¦" He paused to take a deep breath, still struggling with the word. "â€¦If you were raped. You're still perfect in my eyes."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She gazed up at him with vulnerable eyes. "Do you mean that, Sageâ€¦?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Every word, Shar. Every word." He reached out with his other hand, brushing her cheek with his fingertips. "I still love you. And I always will."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She fell into his arms, a joyful smile on her lovely face. He ran his fingers through her hair and held her close,

his eyes closed, enjoying the simple feeling of her body in his arms. He hated lying to her in such a way, but there had been no other option. Sage wasn't as perfect and accepting as he had pretended; the idea of his wife being raped certainly did disturb him, and made a streak of revulsion and disappointment stain his heart. But he would never let her know that. Shara was too important to him, and he vowed to never tell her the truth. All he did was hold her.

---

**AN: **Wheeâ€¦ Not the most cheery ending imaginable, but it's probably the most realistic. No guy is perfect, after all. Not even sexy Sage. Mmmâ€¦ now to see how Rowen will react to the news. And see if Shara figures out that Sage is lyingâ€¦ Oh, the fun I could have if she does find outâ€¦ *wicked grin* I'm so evilâ€¦ Heheheâ€¦ Stay tuned; amazing revelations are still on their wayâ€¦ And a fun confrontation between the Warriors and the mysterious Warlordâ€¦

## 9. Revelations

**Disclaimer:Â  **I don't own the Ronin Warrriors, blah, blah, blah.Â  Shara, Kenji, Miaka, Rime, Eros, and the Empress are all mine.Â  No taking my six characters without permission, and no suing me for using the Ronins.

Revelations

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Hey!Â  You found them!"Â  Kento waved at the approaching foursome, a smile on his face.Â  "That's cool, man.Â  Now all we have left to do is find Kenji and save him."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Miaka glanced at Shara, waiting for her to speak up.Â  When she didn't say a word, Miaka became concerned.Â  "Hey, Sharaâ€¦?Â  Don't you have something to tell everyoneâ€¦?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara clung to Sage's arm, a dark expression crossing her face before being replaced by the falsely bright mood that she had been forcing ever since she and her husband had been reunited.Â  "Nope.Â  Nothing at all."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The redhead frowned in dismay.Â  "Liar.Â  You better tell them, Shara, or I will.Â  They deserve to know."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Why, Miaka?Â  What would be the point?Â  We're going to destroy the Empress and her Warlord anyway.Â  They don't need an extra motivation."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "That's not the reason to tell them!"Â  Miaka propped her hands on her hips and glared at the blonde woman.Â  "They care, you dummy.Â  They're going to find out anyway.Â  And if some other person tells them, especially if it's a Dynasty member, it'll be so much worse!Â  They need to know, Shara.Â  Good God, especially Sage!Â  How can you keep the truth from him, of all people?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Cye glanced from one girl to the next, a troubled look on his face.Â  "â€¦ What are you two talking about?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Taking a step forward, Rowen gave Shara a long look.Â  "â€¦ Something's happened.Â  Something you don't want to talk about."Â  He surveyed the manner of her clothing.Â  "Maybe more than one thing.Â  But, Shara, listen.Â  If you're keeping something important from usâ€¦ something we need to knowâ€¦Â  I wish you would tell us."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She continued to clutch Sage's arm tightly, her eyes growing more and more distant with every word addressed to her.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Miaka threw up her hands in frustration.Â  "Fine!Â  I'll tell them!Â  Guys, Shara told me thatâ€”"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "No!"Â  Shara let go of Sage, throwing herself at her friend, grabbing her arm and squeezing it painfully.Â  "Shut up, Miaka!Â  Don't say it, don't say it!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The other woman gently pried Shara's hands off her arm.Â  "Someone's got to.Â  I know you think saying it will make it true somehowâ€¦ that's when the sorrow will finally strike you, when others find out.Â  But you can't keep it hidden forever.Â  Some things must be told, no matter what.Â  And I know it's going to hurt, butâ€¦Â  Well, you can't really start healing until you can actually feel the pain.Â  Let it out, Shara.Â  Let yourself hurt."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara stood quietly for a moment, contemplating her friend's words.Â  The Warriors stood and waited patiently, wondering what possibly could have happened to change Shara so completely.Â  When she finally raised her head, there was bitterness in her eyes, and in the words that followed.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Fine.Â  You'll get your way, Miaka.Â  As always."Â  She faced the Ronins, fumbling for the words she needed.Â  "When I was taken, Rime, the Warlord who grabbed me, placed me in a room.Â  I guess to await torture or something.Â  Anyway, another Warlord arrived shortly thereafter, and he told me quite a tale.Â  Told the reason the Dynasty had kidnapped Kenji.Â  They needed him for some sort of experiment.Â  Apparently there's some legendary Armor that no one has ever seen before.Â  Anâ€¦ unstable Armor.Â  No one knows how to summon it, but they suspect that only the child of two people who possess Armors can bring it forth.Â  The thought Kenji was the key.Â  So they took himâ€¦ and they used him to try and get the Armor."Â  She paused for a moment, her voice growing thick with sadness.Â  "But he couldn't take itâ€¦Â  He was only six years oldâ€¦Â  Not strong enough yet to hold up under the tests and experimentsâ€¦Â  Andâ€¦ andâ€¦ he told meâ€¦ the Warlord saidâ€¦ that Kenjiâ€¦ thatâ€¦ he had diedâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Everyone stood completely still for several moments, the meaning of her words slowly sinking in.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Wait a minute.Â  You're saying thatâ€¦ that Little Man isâ€¦ deadâ€¦?"Â  Kento asked with childlike uncertainty.Â  Cye, wanting to disbelieve, but hearing the truth of Shara's words, merely hugged his housemate to try and comfort him.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "It can't be trueâ€¦"Â  Ryo shook his head dejectedly.Â  "I can't believe itâ€¦"Â  Miaka wrapped a sympathetic arm around his waist, leaning her head on his shoulder.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Sage had slumped against the wall, horror written across his face for all to see.Â  "My sonâ€¦Â  Noâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Rowen wasn't moving at all.Â  He simply stared at Shara, the shock of her news too strong for him to bear.Â  He closed his eyes for the briefest of moments, gathering all the strength he could, before reaching out to draw Shara into a warm embrace.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "It's okayâ€¦Â  You can cry now."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â His warm breath caressed her ear, ruffled her hair.Â  Shara's first instinct was to push him away, to hide their relationship from Sage, and simply because she was afraid of being touched.Â  But almost immediately after that feeling tried to take control, another swept over her.Â  It felt good to be held in Rowen's arms.Â  She could feel his pain as she pressed her fingers against his rigid back, but he was trying to hide it so he could comfort her.Â  Wonderful Rowen.Â  Selfless whenever he had to be.Â  Then she felt his mind pressing toward hers, trying to establish the easy link that happened between them.Â  Her fear took over again.Â  She couldn't let him see what had happened, couldn't let him know the memories she held within.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara pushed him away.Â  "Noâ€¦Â  I can't.Â  I can't cry until this is all over.Â  Until the Empress is destroyed, and that wretched Warlord who delivered the news is killed as well.Â  I have to be strong until then, a Warrior.Â  After that, I'll let myself cry.Â  I'll let myself be a mother again."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Rowen nodded slowly.Â  "â€¦ Alright, Shara.Â  As you wish."Â  He looked around at the other Ronins, each in their own state of grief.Â  "Well.Â  Then let's get it done.Â  Let's go find the throne room.Â  A castle like this has got to have one, and that's probably where the Empress and her Warlord are waiting."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Sage lifted his head and met the blue-haired Warrior's gaze.Â  "Yes.Â  Let's kill them quickly.Â  Then we can go homeâ€¦Â  Get out of this wretched place."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara took her husband's hand and gave him a grim smile.Â  Ryo and Miaka also joined hands.Â  The other three Ronins exchanged grave, determined looks.Â  The seven started down the long, dark hallway, instinctively knowing it would lead them to

their destination.Â  To the person who had caused all of this pain.Â  The wicked Empress of the Dynasty.

Of course, things never go simply for the Ronins.Â  As they approached a large set of black marble doors several minutes later, a squadron of Dynasty soldiers burst from the throne room, rushing the seven fighters.Â  Sage called for his armor again, and the other four Warriors prepared for the fight.

"Shara!Â  Miaka!Â  Hide!" Ryo called out as he jumped into the battle.Â  "We'll take care of this!"

Miaka nodded, obediently sneaking into a darkened room on the other side of the hall.Â  But Shara ran straight at the approaching army, ducking and dodging her way through them to the throne room doors.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Shara!Â  You'll get yourself killed!" Miaka yelled after her.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I don't care!Â  I'm going to rip her head off personally!" the young woman called back before vanishing through the black
doors.

---

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She stood in a black room, facing a long staircase that lead up to a tremendous black throne.Â  A woman sat in the chair, long black hair cascading down her back and snaking across the floor.Â  Her white skin glowed under the black light that shone down on her from some light fixture that Shara could not see.Â  Her black dress was slit up to the hip on both sides, exposing most of the long legs that were crossed in front of her.Â  Beside her on the throne's platform stood a small boy.Â  A boy with wild blue hair and teal eyes.Â  Kenji.Â  He wasn't dead after all; she should've known that she couldn't trust a Dynasty Warlord.Â  Shara felt a great weight lift from her shoulders.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She stood before the dark woman, her head high in refusal to let her fear shine through.Â  "Let my son
go."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The Empress reached out and touched the boy's shoulder with perfect black nails.Â  "No.Â  Kenji is mine; he prefers to stay here with me."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "You lie!Â  My son would never want to be with an evil demon like you!"Â  Her fists clenched in anger as she climbed the stairs to the Empress' throne.Â  "Give him back before I have to kill you!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The Empress delicately put one hand to her lips, trying to smother a laugh.Â  "You?Â  Kill me?Â  Without your Armor?Â  Impossible."Â  She ran her fingers through Kenji's hair and smiled adoringly at him.Â  "This mean lady is trying to hurt me.Â  Please, stop her, my childâ€¦Â  Save your dearest
mother."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "He's _not_ yourâ€”"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Yes, Mother."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara's step faltered.Â "â€¦ Kenjiâ€¦Â Youâ€¦ you called herâ€¦Â Noâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The young boy stepped forward, his eyes reflecting the gleam of the silver katana he wielded with the precision of a master.Â "Leave my mother alone, human."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She fell to her knees in front of him and tried to push the blade away from her face.Â "Kenji.Â Put that down now.Â You might hurt yourself."Â When he didn't do what she told him, she raised her voice and spoke sharply.Â "Listen to me!Â I'm your mother!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â His expression twisted into one of pure hatred.Â "Don't treat me like a little kid!Â You can't tell me what me to do!Â You're not my mother!"Â With a jerk, he sunk the sword deep into her shoulder.Â "You're not!Â You're not!Â You're not!"Â Each cry was emphasized by another stab.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara grabbed the blade and forced it to the floor, trying not to cry out as it bit into her flesh.Â Kenji struggled to raise it once more, but was halted as Shara placed her knee on the sword and gripped his hands tightly in her own, prying the sword from his grasp.Â With that threat neutralized, she wrapped her arms around the boy and held him tightly against her.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Let me go!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She buried her face against his small shoulder.Â "Kenjiâ€¦ Stopâ€¦Â Please justâ€¦ stopâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Leave me alone!"Â He pounded her back with his fists, and, with a supernatural burst of strength, shoved Shara away from him.Â She teetered on the step, off balance, before tipping backwards and plummeting down the steep stairway.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The door to the Empress' chamber burst open.Â "Shara!Â Where are you?"Â Rowen's strong body was framed in the doorway.Â "Are you oâ€”"Â His gaze landed on Shara's fallen form.Â "â€¦ Noâ€¦"Â He rushed to her side and touched her shoulder gently, the evil Empress forgotten as he gazed at Shara's twisted and bloodied body.Â "Sharaâ€¦Â Whoâ€¦ Howâ€¦"Â Rowen cradled her body against him, his lips brushing her cool cheek, her soft lips.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Shara!Â Rowen!Â Where did you two go?"Â The doors flew open again, and the sounds of the battle raging outside leaked into the throne room before being shut out as the door slammed shut once more.Â Another man had stepped into the chamber, his gold hair hiding half his face from view.Â A determined gleam shone in his clear blue eyes as he started up the stairway toward the Empress.Â His eyes suddenly landed on the boy by her side and he nearly tripped over his own feet.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Kenjiâ€¦Â You're alive!Â Thank God.Â I knew the Dynasty had to have been lyingâ€¦"Â He continued up the stairs, a smile on his face.Â He still hadn't noticed Rowen or Shara.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Sage of Halo.Â So you finally arrived to save the boy."Â The Empress rose from her throne, obsidian eyes gleaming with a cold light.Â "Why do you care?Â He's not even your son, after all."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â His eyes narrowed.Â "Shut up.Â No matter what you may have forced his mind to believe, Kenji will always be my son.Â You cannot take him from me." Â Lifting his sword in the air, Sage advanced forward, eyes focused on his son's captor.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "That's not what I was referring to, Halo."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Those words made him stop.Â "â€¦ What?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "I didn't mean that he was my son now; all I meant was that he isn't yours.Â Shara's, certainly.Â But not yours."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He shook his head.Â "Noâ€¦Â I don't believe you.Â I don't!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Ask you darling wife, then.Â â€¦ If she's still alive, that is."Â The Empress lifted her hand and gestured to Rowen.Â "And your fellow Warrior, as well.Â I don't believe you'll enjoy the answers you receiveâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Sage glanced back and dropped his blade after his eyes landed on Shara.Â "Sharâ€¦Â No!"Â Dashing back down the stairs, he shoved Rowen away and clutched the wounded girl's body.Â Eyes blazing with hatred as he stared at the Empress, Sage snapped, "How did you do this?Â I'll destroy you, demon!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "I?Â My dear boy, I had nothing to do with your wife's injuries.Â They were all caused by my precious son."Â She patted the child on the head and laughed wickedly.Â "Will you kill him for hurting Shara, Halo?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "He only did it because of you.Â You're still the cause of all this.Â I'll still kill you!"Â Sage kissed his wife's forehead, lowered her gently to the floor, and stood.Â "Quit hiding behind my son, coward.Â Face me."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The Empress chuckled, a superior smirk curving her black lips.Â "What a pathetic husband you are.Â Halo, you could be curing your wife right now, preventing her death.Â Instead you insist on trying to destroy me."Â She began walking down the stairway, each step graceful and precise.Â "You're afraid.Â Afraid that healing her will weaken you again.Â And for a man to show weakness is an unforgivable sin.Â Typical male absurdity.Â Now wonder Shara constantly pushes you aside in favor of Rowen.Â He's

ten-times the man you'll ever be."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Shut up!Â I won't fall for your petty mind games!" Sage shouted, his hand making a slashing motion through the air.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "But he is.Â Look at him now, tending to the love of his life with infinite patience and care.Â Holding her, kissing her, wondering for the millionth time why you were chosen over him.Â Rowen cannot see how Shara could choose you.Â In his opinion you're a terrible husband.Â Always running off, leaving your wife alone.Â What a wonderful way to show you care."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Rowen lifted his head and spoke to his fellow Ronin.Â "Don't listen, Sage.Â It's not true.Â Not at all."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The Empress switched her cold gaze to Rowen.Â "You lie, Strata.Â That's all you ever do.Â Everyone knows Sage disgusts you.Â You think you'd be a much better husband for Shara.Â You even think you love her more than Sage does."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The blue-haired Warrior spread his hands in front of him.Â "Sure, I admit I've thought it sometimes.Â Â But I don't _believe_ it.Â Those thoughts show up in times of weakness, when I'm hurting so much that I can barely see straight.Â Those times fade, though, and I remember how dearly Sage loves Shara.Â And then I can breathe again, because I know she'll always be taken care of."Â Rowen paused, a smile crossing his face.Â "You know what?Â It's okay to be angry and jealous at times.Â As long as you never forget what truly matters."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Shar's happiness," Sage finished quietly.Â He flashed a slight grin at his friend.Â "I couldn't agree with you more."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The Empress was seething with rage, furious that she couldn't manipulate the Ronins into fighting one another.Â "Well aren't you two _precious_?Â Friends again, despite all your troubles.Â How very sweet."Â She fixed her hateful eyes on Sage.Â "Tell me, Halo.Â Would you still want to be friends with Rowen if you knew his ultimate secret?Â If you knew the final, darkest fact Shara and Rowen have hidden from you?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Sage shrugged, an easy smile on his face.Â "It wouldn't matter.Â You can't turn us against one another, Empress.Â Just stop trying and deal with it."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Would you like to hear their secret, Halo?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Rowen grabbed his friend's arm.Â "Tell her no, dude.Â Don't listen to anything she says.Â She's only trying to poison you against Shara and me."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The blond Warrior laughed.Â "Don't worry so much.Â Nothing she could possibly say would hurt

me."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Don't count on thaâ€”"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Have you ever wondered, Halo, why your son has blue hair?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Sage looked up at the dark woman, eyes narrowed.Â "What are you talking about?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Both his parents have blonde hair, correct?Â So how did little Kenji end up with blue?Â Hmmâ€¦Â Perhaps the father isn't who everyone assumes it isâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Rowen touched Sage's shoulder timidly, noticing how stiff his body had become.Â "Look, man, Iâ€”"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Bastardâ€¦ You despicable bastard!"Â Sage whirled around, his hands grasping for Rowen's throat.Â "You knew!Â And you didn't tell me!Â You let me thinkâ€¦ think that Kenji was really my son!Â You've stolen everything away from me, everything I held sacred!Â I'm going to kill you!"Â His grip tightened around the blue-haired man's throat, cutting off his air.Â Rowen gripped Sage's wrists, trying to loosen the blond's angry grasp without success.Â Colorful dots began to dance in front of Rowen's eyes as his body was deprived of oxygen.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Sage!Â Noâ€¦"Â

A delicate female voice broke through the blood-red haze that clouded Sage's vision.Â He looked over Rowen's shoulder and saw his wife slowly attempting to sit up, clutching her wounded stomach with one hand and pushing herself up with the other.Â He noticed the pleading look in her eyes and was able to break through the wall of hatred that had surrounded his heart.

"Sharâ€¦"Â He released Rowen and collapsed to his knees beside Shara.Â "Tell meâ€¦ tell me what she said isn't trueâ€¦"

Her smile was full of remorse.Â "I wish I could, Sage.Â I really wish I couldâ€¦Â But it isn't.Â I never wanted to tell youâ€¦Â I knew you'd be hurtâ€¦Â But it doesn't change anything.Â You're still Kenji's real father, whether or not it's biological.Â You're the one who takes care of him, the one he loves the most.Â So don't be angry.Â You still have a family.Â And we'll always be with you."

"You're rightâ€¦"Â He placed his hands over Shara's wounds and smiled.Â "Let's get you fixed up so we can grab our kid and get out of here."

Rowen gasped as he continued to try and regain his breath.Â "Hey, Sageâ€¦Â Quite aâ€¦ gripâ€¦ you've gotâ€¦ thereâ€¦Â Good thing Sharaâ€¦ woke upâ€¦ when she didâ€¦Â Or I'd beâ€¦ one deadâ€¦ Roninâ€¦"

Sage shot him a dark look.Â "Don't get all friendly with me, boy.Â We're going to have a serious talk when we get back home.Â I was

going to be nice, but that's pretty much over and done with now."

He shook his head sadly.Â  "Jeez, you'd think the whole thing was my idea or something the way you're actingâ€¦"

"I wouldn't be surprised if it was."Â  Sage finished healing his wife and leaned back, his face white.Â  "There, all done.Â  Man.Â  Near-mortal wounds are even more drainingâ€¦"Â  He stood on shaky legs, offering Shara his hand.Â  "Come on, princess.Â  Time to get up."

She pulled herself to her feet and faced the Empress.Â  "See?Â  None of your silly tricks worked.Â  You still couldn't tear us apart.Â  Now return Kenji before we have to get rough."

The Empress smiled.Â  "But the show isn't over yet.Â  I still have one last card to play."Â  She turned and extended her hand to the boy behind her.Â  "Come to Mother, dear one.Â  Let's show these three your true potential."

Kenji obediently approached the evil woman, his hand raised to clutch hers.Â  She closed her eyes and a wave of black energy flowed from her fingers and into Kenji's body, filling it with dark light.Â  He writhed, his body stretching and seemingly being pulled apart by the Empress' spell.Â  But then he became rather calm as the power weaved its true magic on the child.Â  He grew taller, more built.Â  The black light obscured most of the transformation, but it didn't take long for it to vanish and reveal what had happened to the small child.

A tall man with a perfectly toned body and a proud, strong face stood before them.Â  His wild blue hair brushed the collar of his simple black shirt, one wave falling across his right eye.Â  His lips were full and sensuous, curved into a sneer.Â  Luxurious black silk pants clothed his long legs.Â  But it was his eyes that were the most striking.Â  The deep blue-green of the sea.Â  Endless.Â  Unfathomable.Â  Mysterious.Â  Charming.Â  Evil.

And familiar.Â  Dry sobs began to shake Shara's body once more.Â  She recognized the man standing at the Empress' side.Â  The man her son had become.Â  It was _him_.Â  The monster that had ravaged her body.Â  Her own son had been the one.

"That's right, dear girl.Â  My strongest Warlord, your 'Kenji,' is your attacker."

The Empress placed her hand on the tall man's arm and he kneeled, kissing the inside of her wrist.Â  "I am ready to do your bidding, Empress Nephalia.Â  What do you wish of me?"

She motioned for him to rise and stepped toward him, brushing his cheek with her black nails.Â  "My dearâ€¦Â  My only request is that you rid us of these tiresome Ronins.Â  You may even kill the girl, if you wish.Â  It seems we do not need her after all."Â  Nephalia moved even closer, trailing her lips across his.Â  "Then together we shall celebrate the Dynasty's victory.Â  We will have achieved every goal we have ever set.Â  All because of you.Â  My dear, sweet princeâ€¦"

He kissed her softly, his hands stroking her back.Â  "As you wish, my

Empress.Â  I will look forward to it."Â  The man turned away from Nephalia and began descending the stairs.

Rowen and Sage stared at the tall man, refusing to believe what they were seeing.Â  There was no way the sweet, gentle boy they both loved could be the same person as this wicked devil who approached.Â  It was an impossibility.Â  But their eyes had not deceived them.Â  Nephalia's magic had wiped Kenji's mind clean of his past.Â  She had built him a new place in the Dynasty, making him a Warlord and a prince.Â  He was no longer the boy they had once known.Â  Though it torn them apart inside, they both knew what had to be done.Â  They had to fight
Kenji.

---

**AN:Â  **Named the chapter well, didn't I?Â  *giggles*Â  I'm a sick girl.Â  I wonder how many of you saw that one comingâ€¦Â  Either of the revelations, I guess.Â  I hinted enough at one of themâ€¦Â  You people should've been smart enough to figure it out.Â  ~_^Â  But if I actually managed to shock anyone, woohoo!Â  I'm happy.Â  ^_^Â  Anyway, I guess the next chapter will be the last one.Â  Oooooâ€¦ I love conclusions.Â  Though I'm not the greatest at tying up all the loose endsâ€¦Â  Oh, well.Â  We'll see how it turns out!

## 10. Sacrifice

****

**Disclaimer: **I don't own the Ronin Warriors. Never have, never will. Kenji/Ouji, Shara, Miaka, Nephalia, Eros, and Rime are mine. No taking them.

**

Sacrifice

**

"Hey, Kenjiâ€”"

The man cut Rowen off. "Do not call me by that name. It is not mine at all. The boy Kenji died days ago. I personally witnessed his demise. I may have a few physical characteristics in common with the child, but we are most certainly not the same person."

"Fine, fine." Sage crossed his arms over his chest. "What shall we call you then?" Maybe being able to call him by a new name would help him forget who the Warlord really was. Help him forget that it was Kenji.

"My name, little Ronin, is Ouji Kaijin, Prince of the Dynasty." He nodded graciously, taking for granted they'd be impressed by his title.

"Prince of Destruction," Sage murmured to himself.

"Very good, Halo. You know your Japanese." Ouji laughed. "Of course, that shouldn't be very surprising, should it?"

"Considering I've been living in Japan my entire life, no, not really."

"Yes. The man born to Japanese parents who looks oddly Caucasian. The power of your soul's self-image overcoming genetics. You Ronins really are freaks, aren't you?" Chuckling, the Warlord turned toward Shara. "My, my. You look terrified. What could possibly be wrong with you?"

She shrank back, her eyes wide in terror. "Stay awayâ€¦ Don't come any closer!" Her arms were instinctively wrapping around her chest, shielding her body from his piercing gaze. "Pleaseâ€¦ Don't hurt meâ€¦"

He laughed richly, eyes glittering. "You silly girl. I do not derive pleasure from attacking women. I merely did what had to be done. You understand." Stepping forward, the Warlord slid his arm around her waist and forced her body against his. "Of course, if you want to experience it once more, I'd be more than willing to oblige."

She shrieked, trying to push him away. "No! Never! Pleaseâ€¦ please let me go!" Shara felt his fingers slipping underneath the bottom of her jacket, brushing her bare thighs, probing insistently. Whimpering pitifully, she weakly strained against the arm that clutched her waist tightly. It was happening all over again. And she could do nothing to stop him.

"Hey! What are you doing?"

An armored hand closed on the Warlord's shoulder, yanking him back and forcing him to release Shara. Rowen's dark blue eyes were burning with fury. "Never treat a lady that way. It isn't nice."

Sage's expression was bleak. He understood precisely why Shara had reacted so strongly to the prince's touch. Why she hadn't struggled fiercely. The dark man had already conquered Shara. He had broken her spirit and made her feel helpless during their last encounter. Sage nearly wept. This man, this Warlord, was the one who had raped his wife. The horror of what that meant nearly knocked him flat. Anger began to burn through him, starting in his throat and spreading to his fingertips. Kneeling, he reached for his sword.

Out of the corner of his eye, Rowen caught a glimpse of Sage raising his sword in preparation of an attack. The blond was trembling with anger, his blue eyes focused on the Warlord prince.

"Sage! Put that down! You can't kill your own son!" he snapped. "Get a grip!"

He gritted his teeth, the tip of his blade pointed at Ouji. "You don't understand, Rowen. You don't know what this guy has done. He deserves to die."

"He's under a spell, Sage! Whatever he did, it wasn't his idea! He's Nephalia's puppet, man. And no matter what he looks like, this is still your son. It's still Kenji!" Rowen struggled to hold the Warlord still so he wouldn't attack Sage.

Rowen's words slowly sunk in and Sage's sword drooped.

"No!"

Hands grabbed at Rowen's back. Shara leapt toward Ouji, eyes wild, the point of an arrow flying at his heart.

Rowen released the Warlord and grabbed the blonde girl's wrist, stopping her mere seconds before she would've plunged the arrow into Ouji's chest. The prince backed away from them, a strange smile on his face. But Rowen pushed him out of his mind, instead focusing on the wildcat he held by the arm. Her head whipped around violently; her arms and legs churned in desperation. She shrieked and shouted wordlessly, her normally lovely face twisted by sheer hate. Shara fought against his grasp ferociously, but Rowen held tight. After several moments her writhing body went still. He gently pulled her toward him, wrapping both arms around her in a soothing embrace.

"It's okay, Shara. He didn't hurt you. Let him be, okay? We'll get Kayura to fix him, and you'll have your son back. So don't try to attack him again, alright?"

Her gaze was hollow. "Didn't hurt meâ€¦? Noâ€¦ You're wrongâ€¦" Reaching up, she grasped the zipper at her throat and gradually eased it down. She halted halfway down her chest, pushing the jacket open with her fingertips to show him the skin that had been hidden underneath.

The soft white skin of her throat and shoulders were covered with angry red marks and sinister purple smudges. He saw welts from where someone had bitten the delicate flesh of her neck and breasts. Rowen's earlier observation was now confirmed; something serious had happened to Shara. She had been attacked, and possibly raped. His blood ran cold when he realized who must have done it. The reason why Shara had tried to kill her own son.

"Oh, Godâ€¦" He staggered back a step, still in shock over what he had deduced. "Himâ€¦ Kenji didâ€¦ thatâ€¦?"

Shame clouded her eyes as she slowly nodded. She reached out to him with one hand, silently begging him to forgive her, to look past the terrible blemishes on her body. To not be disgusted. He didn't move to accept her offer.

"Didâ€¦ Heâ€¦ Youâ€¦ Everything?"

She nodded once more in response to his half-asked question. Her hand began to drop as he continued to make no movement toward her. Pain flashed across her face, followed by a deep sorrow. He apparently couldn't accept and forgive. Part of her world came crashing down around her. Her palm brushed her leg, rejected.

Then his arms were around her in a passionate embrace. She found herself pressed against his chest as his fingers trailed through her hair and down her back. Shara was momentarily stunned, but soon lifted her arms and hugged him back.

"It doesn't make a difference at all, Shara. You're an angel remember? Born that way, even. And that'll never change. No matter what happens, you'll be our Angel."

His warm breath tickled her ear and she couldn't help but smile. The Ronins' Angel. A title of which she was definitely proud. She leaned her head against Rowen's shoulder and began to finally relax. The people most important to her had given their understanding and been able to move past the incident. The weakness began to fade from her body. She suddenly also became aware of how insane she had been acting. Chuckling softly, Shara straightened, reluctantly pulling out of Rowen's arms, and faced her tormentor.

"Well. Ouji, was it? Looks like you're going to have quite a fight on your hands."

He brushed the dark wave of hair out of his eyes, a soft smile on his face. "Perhaps. But it's certainly one I shall win. Your friends seem to have the unfortunate belief that I will suddenly cease to be a Warlord and transform into the child they seem to think I am. But Kenji is no part of me. I can't understand why you fools think we are the same person. No matter. It is that blind faith that will be your downfall."

She shrugged. "I don't know about that. I mean, we have Armors on our side. What do you have? Charm and obedience? Not exactly terrifying qualities."

He lifted one black eyebrow and laughed. "Oh, really? Hmmâ€¦ Then perhaps it's time for a demonstration." Lifting his hand, the prince shouted to the dark sky.

"Ancient Armor! Mystical power! Descend to me! Become one with me! Great Armor, I summon you on behalf of the Dynasty! Grant your evil powers to me!"

Thunder sounded through the room and the star-like points in the ceiling grew red as blood. Nephalia was nearly swooning from ecstasy. Her black eyes were gleaming with an unearthly light, her lips twisted into a rapturous smile as a black light descended from the ceiling and struck the tall Warlord

"Armor of Destruction! Give your strength to me!"

A brilliant flash of dark light flooded the cavernous room. From the ceiling descended a black silhouette of what appeared to be Armor. It merged with the iridescent figure of Ouji, giving off another blast of power. The three Ronins had to shade their eyes from the intensity of the radiance. When it was all over, the trio cautiously raised their eyes to gaze at the Warlord.

Ouji flexed his fist, marveling at the gleaming black glove. He touched the sword on his back, feeling the silky texture of the lethal silver. The prince examined the black Armor that shielded his body, excitedly memorizing and reveling in its every detail. The Armor's surface almost seemed to be swirling, like the deep abyss of a black hole. Reaching up he removed his glinting helmet and tossed it casually aside.

"Looks like things are a bit more even now, eh, Ronins?"

Shara fell to the ground, her knees weak from dread. The prince had been able to acquire the fabled ancient Armor, the most powerful

weapon in all of existence. But that should have been impossible. The Empress had found Kenji incapable of summoning the Armor. That was the entire reason for her to send her prince after Shara. If he had the capacity to summon it all along, then what was the purpose of his attempt to impregnate her? Merely to break her spirit and make their victory sweeter? No. The Dynasty didn't think that way. They favored utter destruction over psychological damage. Then what could possibly be the reason?

Nephalia spoke, reading the young woman's mind easily. "Ouji was unable to summon the Armor in the beginning. I suspect it was because his heart was still too pure. When he returned from having intercourse with you, Shara, Ouji was capable of bringing forth the power. The purity that remained in his heart had been destroyed. Not surprising. What act could be more wicked than the one he committed? And now he shall use the Armor to destroy you all." Her head was thrown back, a triumphant laugh trilling from her lips. "Go, my prince! Rid us of our enemies!"

The Warlord bowed and drew his sword. "As you wish, my Empress." He faced the Ronins, a smirk lighting his face. "Shall we get down to business, boys?"

The throne room's doors burst open and in rushed three tall figures. Shining orange, pale blue, and white Armors clad their bodies; powerful swords and staffs were clenched in their fists. Three sets of brilliant blue eyes, each a slightly different shade, set in three brave, determined faces flashed fiercely. The man in white stepped forward, his head high.

"Cavalry's heâ€”"

"Where is the witch? I want to fight her by myself!" Miaka scampered in and cut in front of the Ronins. Her long red hair flew wildly around her face like a fiery cloud. She clutched an unlit torch in her hand, waving it around as if it were a mighty weapon. "Lemme at 'er!"

Ryo ran a hand over his face and sighed. "Sweetheartâ€¦ I know you mean well and are only trying to help, but put that thing down and shut up. This isn't your fight."

She propped her hands on her hips and gave him a dark look. "You sayin' I'm not tough enough to fight with you guys? Not good enough to lend a hand?"

"Yeah, that's exactly what he's saying. Now move!" Kento waved a dismissive hand in the direction of the far wall. "Go sit over there or something."

Annoyed, the redhead stomped hard on Kento's foot before doing as he had directed. "Fine. Just wait until we get back homeâ€¦ I'll pay you all back for thisâ€¦"

Ryo winced. "Thanks, buddy. I'm really going to get it now."

"Hey, you said it firâ€”"

"Will you two please stop with the ridiculous behavior?" Ouji gave them all an incredulous look. "You're the only hope for the earth?

It's amazing your world has lasted _this_ long. You're absolutely pathetic."

"Hey! I resent that remark," Ryo grumbled.

"More like _resemble_ it," Kento quipped.

The Warlord groaned. "Alright, now I have three reasons to kill you. A, to please my Empress and gain my reward. B, to give the Dynasty the glory it truly deserves. And C, to stop your inane chatter and trite witticisms!"

"Guys!" Rowen cut in with a roar. "Shut up! This isn't time for your stupid jokes! We've got a serious problem on our hands, in case you didn't notice!"

Kento glanced around. "What? All I see is a sexy, handsome guy in black and a scary lady with freakishly long hair. What's there to be afraid of?"

Rowen almost smacked the rock-headed Warrior. "Hello? Look. Guy in black is wearing _Armor_. Carrying a _sword_. He nearly _killed_ Shara. The guy is _dangerous_. Understand, dummy?"

"I still don't seeâ€”"

"You think he's handsome? _And_ sexy?" Cye inquired in a faint, worried voice.

"Not as much as you. Don't worry, Cye." Kento patted the brown-haired Ronin's shoulder. "No one can compare to you."

"Oh, wonderful. Now the lovebirds are going at it." Rowen threw up his hands in exasperation. "Come on! Can we please just concentrate on fighting for a minute here? You two can discuss who's cuter later."

Cye nodded briskly. "Yes, of course. I apologize, Rowen."

Shara walked over and placed her hand on Ryo's arm. "Please, don't kill himâ€¦ I know he's a Warlordâ€¦ But underneath Nephalia's magic is my sonâ€¦ So, please, Ryo. Be careful."

He flashed her a quick smile. "No problem, Shara. We'll just knock him out and drag him back home with us. Then Kayura will take care of him."

She smiled back and kissed his cheek. "Thanks, Ryo. Good luck." Turning, she strode over to stand beside Miaka. The two women waved at the guys. "We'll be cheering for you!"

Sage joined his fellow Ronins and raised his sword. "You guys ready?" They all nodded and the five turned to face the dark prince.

He smiled at them, amusement flickering in his deep eyes. "Do you really believe you can defeat me? You unskilled, inept fools think you have the power required to defeat the Armor of legend? The feeling of power that undulates within you is truly an imprudent illusion of grandeur. There is no conceivable way for you to achieve your goals. Why don't you lay down your weapons and swear loyalty to

the Dynasty? Though you are weaker than I, the five of you would still be a venerated addition to our legions."

Kento nudged Cye with his elbow. "What did this guy do, swallow a thesaurus?"

"No, you're probably the only guy who'd get hungry enough to eat a book, Kento," Ryo joked.

"Oh, you're just mad because you didn't get to eat before we left. Chill, dude."

"And _why_ didn't I get to eat anything? Could it possibly have been because you ate it all, pig boy?"

"You're getting off subject again," Rowen complained. "Come on, guys, pay attention!"

"Sorry, Rowen," the two Warriors sheepishly chimed together.

Sage pointed his sword at the Warlord and declared in a strong voice, "You're insane if you think we'll just give up and go home! The Ronin Warriors never surrender! We'll stop your misguided destruction and return you to your former self! Heed my words, Warlord! We will annihilate all of your realm!"

"Melodramatic, aren't we?" Ouji shrugged his shoulders and sighed. "Such a waste. Nothing to be done, I suppose. As you wish, Halo, I will fight you." He set back in a fighting stance and gestured for them to attack. "Begin."

Sage and Ryo leapt into action, their swords flashing through the air. Ouji didn't move as he saw them approach, didn't adjust his position so he could effectively block the attacks. He merely smiled. The closer the Warriors drew, the broader his smile became. An instant before the swords plunged into his body, the Warlord's figure blurred momentarily and then became well-defined again. The Ronins lay at his feet, their weapons several feet away.

"Next?" Ouji laughed cruelly. "Dare you challenge my power now that you've seen my capabilities? Or failed to see, shall I say. I'm too fast for your pitiful human eyes to follow."

Cye stared at the fallen duo in amazement. "Howâ€¦ how in the world did you do that? It's impossible! No one can move that quickly!"

"Yeah, dude," Kento protested. "This isn't Dragonball Z."

"No, this isn't some brainless cartoon fantasy. My powers are based on reality. I truly do have the power to be quicker than any other creature in existence. There's nothing any of you can do to stop me!" Ouji slashed his sword through the air a few times. "Don't even attempt to try."

Rowen nocked an arrow into his bow. "Let's see you dodge this." He released the bowstring with a snap of his wrist and the arrow flew toward the prince. Ouji snatched the projectile out of the air and shattered the thin shaft with one twitch of his fingers. The Warlord opened his hand and a tinkling shower of pieces fell to the

floor.

"Satisfied yet?"

"Not quite." Ryo pushed himself up and staggered on quivering legs. "Got one more trick to try."

Ouji's lips curved in a condescending smirk. "Proceed with your useless attack."

"We'll see how useless it isâ€¦" He rolled across the floor, scooped up his katanas, leapt into the air and shouted, "Rage of Inferno!"

The white-hot flames raced across the ground, setting the very air ablaze with the fire of purity. Ouji stood in the middle of the blaze, his Armor a dark blemish in the midst of the bright fire. The Ronins all shielded their eyes from the brilliance. As the flames died several moments later, the dark prince stood in the only untouched spot on the scorched floor, completely unaffected.

"Anything else?"

The five Warriors looked back and forth at one another, completely at a loss as to what their next move should be.

"No? Alright, then I'll inform you of your choices. You can either surrender and join the Dynasty, or I can kill you right now."

Ryo exchanged silent glances with each of the other four Ronins. Their eyes all said the same thing. The fiery man turned and shot a daredevil smile at Ouji.

"Guess you get to kill us. We'd rather die than become Dynasty scum."

"Your wish is my command." He raised his sword and pointed it toward the ceiling, the east wall, the floor, the west wall, and then back at the ceiling once more. "Darkness, gather in my blade. Bring forth the powers of destruction. Extinguish the light of the Ronins once and for all! I command thee! I summon thee! Rains ofâ€”"

"Stop!"

The gentle chiming of striking metal rang through the room. The Ronins whirled around and stared at the slender silhouette framed in the doorway. Behind the first form were three more shadows, taller and broader than the first. The leader took a step forward and the light fell from the ceiling and illuminated her lovely face. Lady Kayura. The other three walked into the light and their identities were revealed one-by-one. Dais. Sehkmet. Kale. The former Warlords of the Dynasty who became Ronins with the help of Kayura. Now all the Warriors were together.

Shara smiled, automatically thinking the battle would be over as soon as the nine Ronins joined their powers together. But then she remembered that was impossible. The Armor of Angel, the combined strength of all nine Armors, no longer existed. It had been

sacrificed so Sage could be brought back from the Netherworld. The other Ronins had come only to be destroyed. Nothing could stop the Armor of Destruction.

"Precisely, dear girl."

A slim hand grasped Shara's shoulder firmly, the black fingernails digging into the leather. "Nothing can stop my Warlord. Even if you Armor of Angel still existed, it would be no match for the power of destruction. Nothing short of the power of God can stop it."

"That is incorrect, Empress." Kayura switched her cool gaze to Nephalia. "The Armor of Destruction is only one half of the power of the legendary Armor. It only contains the capacity to destroy. Its other half, the Armor of Creation, is equally powerful. The legendary Armor changes with the heart of its owner. Therefore, if I heal Kenji and return him to his normal form, the natural innocence of a child will convert the Armor's destructive power to one of healing and invention. If you had studied the ancient texts closely, you would have known that."

The wicked Empress leveled her icy eyes on Kayura and smiled. "You won't get the chance, Ancient."

Ouji raced toward the blue-haired woman, his sword drawn. Kayura whipped around, raising her staff to fend off the blow. But the Warlord was just too fast. Not even the Ancient's power and speed was a match for him. The slim katana sunk into her chest. It drove through her heart and emerged out of her back, nearly skewering Dais who stood behind her.

The golden staff clattered to the floor, landing with a final, chiming clang.

Ouji withdrew his sword. The beautiful Ancient fell with dreamlike slowness to the floor, her eyes gradually sliding closed.

"Lady!" Dais fell to his knees beside her fallen form. He removed his eyepatch and revealed the horror clouding his blue eyes. "No! This is impossibleâ€¦!"

The other two former-Warlords gathered around their fallen leader, fear on their strong faces. Kayura, their master, their savior, couldn't be dead. She was the Ancient! Strong, noble, proud. Invincible. Nothing could destroy her. It had to be a mistake. Fate wouldn't allow this beautiful woman to die.

Ouji casually wiped the blood on his sword off on the black sleeve of the shirt Kayura wore under her yellow Armor. "How terribly messy." He turned his back on the three Outer Ronins and strolled over to stand by Nephalia, Shara, and Miaka. He faced the eight Warriors and addressed them with a sneer. "She was the great power you depended upon? A weak woman who was felled by one thrust of my sword? How very disgraceful."

None of the eight responded to his mocking words. They were all standing around the Ancient, disbelief on their mourning faces. Ouji looked annoyed at being ignored. He stalked over to where the Ronins had gathered and chuckled darkly.

"She's dead, boys. Get over it."

Sehkmet was the first to turn. His eyes were flaming. When he spoke, his words dripped with acid. "She was our light, you heartless monster. I'll kill you for taking her away."

All the Warriors began to move toward Ouji, the same hate gleaming in each set of eyes, twisting each face into a cruel mask. Their jaws were set firmly, their fists clenched at their sides. Eight hands simultaneously clenched their weapons and eight bodies flung themselves into battle.

As the fight raged toward the center of the room, Shara pressed her lips close to Miaka's ear and spoke in a soft voice. "Distract the Empress. I'm going to check on Kayura." When the redhead began to respond, Shara cut her off. "I don't care how you do it. Try anything."

Miaka nodded and spun to face Nephalia. "Hey, witch! You lookin' for a fight? I know the guys are gonna kick your scrawny Warlord's whiny butt, but I want the honor of killing you for myself! After all I went through in that dungeon. Do you have any _idea_ how much you need to redecorate? The whole dank and dark style is _so_ passÃ©. I don't know how I _survived _in such hideous surroundings!"

The Empress was staring at Miaka, dumbfounded by the screaming, rambling woman. Shara barely suppressed a laugh. It was a silly distraction, but it certainly was effective. As her friend continued to rant, Shara cautiously approached the fallen Ancient and kneeled at her side.

"Ladyâ€¦ Are you still alive?"

Her black lashes fluttered slightly. Dark blue eyes were slowly, painfully opened. Her lips parted and the soft whisper still held the pride and nobility of Kayura's usual voice. "Yes, Sharaâ€¦ I am still hereâ€¦ Though probably not for much longerâ€¦"

The blonde woman cradled the Ancient's head in her lap. "Just hang onâ€¦ I'll get Sage over here and he can fix you right up. Everything will be okay. Justâ€¦ try and stay with us, okay?"

Kayura shook her head weakly. "No, Sharaâ€¦ Sage is still weak from healing you. My wound is mortal. If he tried to heal me, he would die." She drew a short, ragged breath. "This is my fate, little one. I accept it. So must the rest of youâ€¦"

Shara stared into the dying woman's powerful and peaceful eyes. The gentle wisdom in her expression and in her gaze swept over Shata and she sighed in acceptance. "Alright, Kayuraâ€¦ I understand." She brushed away a strand of black-blue hair that had fallen across the Ancient's lips. "What should we do now, Lady? How do we stop Ouji and the Empress without your power? Without your Armor?"

Kayura carefully removed her glove and placed her lily-white hand against Shara's cheek. "You shall have my Armor, Shara. For you are a true Ronin. You are the Hope of Earth. Take care of it."

A soft golden light began to grow in Kayura's palm. It spread to Shara's face and shot to her mind and fingertips. The blonde woman

nearly fainted as a dizzying rush of tingling energy filled her from head to toe. Her body was growing stiff as Kayura's became limp. Finally, after what seemed like an eternity, the glow faded and the Ancient's eyes closed for the final time.

Shara gently lowered the woman's head to the floor. "Thank you, Lady Kayura. Our victory could only happen through you. I'll use your gift to stop this destruction." Rising, she raised her hand and shouted, her voice as loud as a thunderclap.

"Armor of Light! Come to me!"

Kayura's body began to fill with yellow light as the Armor dissolved from around her. Piece by piece, each accompanied by a flash, the Armor transferred from Kayura to Shara. Last to appear was the shining golden staff of the Ancient. Shara looked at it in amazement: controlling the staff was not a result of receiving the yellow Armor. The Armor she now wore had once been the Warlord Anubis' Armor of Cruelty. Kayura had only begun wearing it when Anubis had sacrificed himself to save her from Badamon's control. That was when the Ancient's staff had first been combined with the power of an Armor. Being granted the use of the purified Armor of Light should not give Shara the power to control the Ancient's staff.

But there it was, gleaming in her hand, the delicate gold rings chiming as they struck one another. As she stared at the shimmering hoops, Shara almost thought she could hear Kayura's voice in her head.

**_

I have given you enough of my power to save your son. No less, no more. Do what you must, and then surrender control of my staff. I have been training one of my Warriors to take my place once destiny freed me from the mortal coil. Now that day has finally come. After this battle, tell Dais the staff is his to control. And tell all my Warriors that I am proud of them. That Iâ€¦ loveâ€¦ them.

_**

Shara smiled. "Love, huh? I always knew you were a softie deep down." She bowed her head and tightened her grasp on the staff. "I shall do as you command, Lady Kayuraâ€¦ Please, take care of yourself in the afterlife. Be at peace."

**_

Yesâ€¦ I shall, Shara. I shall.

_**

The voice was gone from her mind as quickly as it had come. The blonde woman raised her head and swept her gaze over the battlefield before her. The Ronins were being slaughtered. Kale, Cye, Sage, Kento, and Sehkmet were all lying on the floor, some unconscious, others merely too weak to stand. Rowen, Ryo, and Dais were fighting valiantly, but were consistently being knocked down. Blood ran down each of their faces. Unsurprisingly, however, they weren't giving up at all. The trio charged for attack after attack. Their efforts were useless, but they wouldn't stop trying. Every time a blow knocked

them aside, they jumped to their feet once more and continued their assault. It was a hopeless battle.

"Then I'll just put a stop to it."

Shara raised the staff and pointed it at Ouji. "Warlord! Prince of the Dynasty! I command you to be still!"

He froze in the middle of a counterstrike, a stunned look on his handsome face. "Whatâ€¦? Howâ€¦?" His eyes landed on Shara. As he absorbed the facts that she was wearing Kayura's Armor and holding her staff, the prince's unfathomable eyes grew dark with anger. "No! That witch! She didn't die!"

"No. She is dead. But she gave me the power I need to stop you."

Shara advanced toward the furious Warlord, waving the Ronins aside as she approached. "Go. Make sure the Empress does not interfere." The three nodded and hurried to obey her command.

The blonde focused her gaze on Ouji. "Princeâ€¦ You shall be stopped. This slaughter can't continue any longer. And I will do it with the power you scorned. The power of the Ancient, and the power of the very Armor you wear." She reached out with one hand and caressed the man's cheek. He tried to jerk his head away, but she merely stepped a little closer and continued.

"Kenjiâ€¦ My dear little boyâ€¦ Mommy will make it all better again. Just hold onâ€¦"

He spat on her. "I'm not your son, woman. Don't touch me again."

Shara wiped the saliva away with the back of her hand. "That's where you're wrong. And I'll prove it to you."

She pressed the top of the staff against his chest and closed her eyes. "Powers above, powers of healing and light. Please, descend from your place on high and fill my staff. Give me the power I need to release the spell cast on this poor soul. Guide him back to the path he should be walking. I implore you! Grant that strength to me!"

Golden light flowed from the tip of her staff and into the Warlord's body. His eyes grew wider and wider, shock written across his face as the healing magic began to take effect. A soft whimper escaped his lips as his body began to shrink, to transform from a well-developed, mature body to the small, delicate form of a child. Ouji let out one final roar of outrage and despair before he completely vanished, leaving the small shape of a young boy covered by a large black shirt.

"Kenjiâ€¦"

He raised his head, wiping his eyes with the back of one diminutive hand. Brilliant teal blue eyes lifted to meet her lovely emerald gaze. A slight smile flickered across the child's lips.

"Mommyâ€¦? Where'd you get the cool

outfit?"

---

****

**AN:** Okay, Okay. So this didn't turn out to be the conclusion after all. I'm gonna need another chapterâ€¦ or two. Depending on how far I decide to twist things. And since I love plot twists, it might end up as two. Who knows? Anyway. I want to make amends with anyone who might get ticked off because I called DBZ "brainless": I like the show, too. I wasn't trying to be mean about it or anything. Okay? Okay. Stay tuned for the final showdown. ^_^

11. Regret

**Disclaimer:Â  **In case you somehow haven't figured it out yet, I do not own the Ronin Warriors or anything associated with them.Â  Don't sue me for using them.Â  I'm broke, and all you'd get outta me is aâ€¦ *searches her pockets* â€¦dime.Â  Not exactly worth it, eh?Â  Shara, Kenji, Empress Nephalia, Miaka, Eros, and Rime are mine.Â  Don't take them without permission, or I'll sue you.Â  Then maybe I could actually have the money needed to buy a lifeâ€¦Â  =P

Regret

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Kenjiâ€¦Â  Oh, Kenji!"Â  Shara fell to her knees and wrapped the boy in a tight embrace.Â  "You're okayâ€¦Â  Thank God you're okay!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The child raised his arms and returned his mother's hug.Â  He started to speak, but suddenly his body went rigid, and a strangled cry scratched its way up his throat and past his lips.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara pulled back a bit and gazed at her son with concern.Â  "Kenjiâ€¦?Â  What's wrong, sweetie?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He placed his hands on her shoulders and violently pushed himself away.Â  "No!Â  Don't touch me!Â  Go away!"Â  Kenji covered his ears with his hand and staggered back, clenching his eyes shut against some invisible force.Â  "Leave me alone!Â  Stop it!Â  Stop it!"Â  Pain and terror twisted his sweet, innocent features.Â  His head whipped from side to side, his small body quaked with fine tremors.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara stretched out one hand and gingerly touched his shoulder.Â  "Honey, calm down!Â  You're going to hurt yourself!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He fell backwards and began to curl up into the fetal position.Â  "Noâ€¦Â  It wasn't meâ€¦Â  I didn'tâ€¦Â  Somebody helpâ€¦Â  Make the pictures go awayâ€¦"Â  Soft whimpers filled the air and the child began to sob wildly.Â  "I'm sorry, Mommy!Â  I didn't want to hurt you!Â  But I didâ€¦Â  Iâ€¦ growed upâ€¦ and Iâ€¦ I hurt youâ€¦Â  I'm sorry, Mommyâ€¦Â  I'm sorryâ€¦Â  I'm sorryâ€¦Â  I'm sorryâ€¦"Â  His words dissolved into a slow, terrified chant of apologies.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara covered her mouth with one hand.Â  "He remembersâ€¦Â  Oh, God!Â  He remembers being a Warlord!"Â  She rushed to her son's side and held him gently.Â  "It's okay, Kenjiâ€¦Â  That wasn't youâ€¦Â  You didn't do anything wrongâ€¦Â  Don't cry, babyâ€¦Â  Please don't cryâ€¦"Â  Stroking his hair, she rocked back and forth on her heels, murmuring soothing words into the small boy's ear.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He pulled out of her embrace and lifted his tormented eyes to meet her gaze.Â  "Mommyâ€¦Â  I don't want itâ€¦Â  I don't want the power any moreâ€¦Â  It hurts, Mommyâ€¦Â  Make it stop.Â  Make it all stopâ€¦"Â  Kenji stretched one hand toward the sword he had dropped on the floor after his transformation had finished.Â  "Please stop the pain, Mommyâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The katana elevated from the floor and floated toward the boy's outstretched hand.Â  It settled in his palm and Kenji held it up to his mother.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Please, Mommy.Â  It hurts."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She accepted the slim blade and held it loosely, uncertain about what she should do next.Â  Feeling a hand on her left shoulder, Shara turned her head and stared up into tear-filled clear blue eyes, a pale face streaked with blood and growing bruises.Â  Sage.Â  Showing his support for whatever she decided to do.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Another hand caressed her right shoulder.Â  Stormy blue eyes and an ocean of wild hair.Â  Proud features twisted by sadness.Â  He was also showing support for her decision.Â  Both Rowen and Sage were waiting for her to make the next move, waiting to see if she would bring a blade against her own son.Â  Both were showing they would accept whatever she did, that they understood why if she actually went through with it.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara switched her gaze to Kenji.Â  She ran her eyes over the delicate blue waves that crowned his head, the tiny, pixie nose that was so similar to her own, the beautiful, soft teal eyes.Â  His small mouth was curved into a gentle smile.Â  Her son, so adorable, and so perfect.Â  _Her_ angel.Â  Six-years-old, but with a wisdom in his gaze that was years ahead of its time.Â  A wisdom that had been forced upon him by the Empress' spell.Â  Nothing would ever be able to erase that tragic knowledge from his eyes, that never-ending sadness.Â  He would never be able to grow up the way a child should.Â  No matter what he did, the darkness of his possessed self's deeds would haunt him ceaselessly.Â  They would eat away at his young mind, destroying it, driving him mad.Â  It wasn't a future any mother would wish for her child.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  But what was her other option?Â  Spilling the blood of her own son?Â  How could any mother wish to do that either?Â Â  Neither choice was acceptable, but what other alternatives were there?Â  There was no way to save Kenji.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara wiped tears from her eyes with the back of her left hand, tightening her grasp on the sword with her right.Â

"Okay, babyâ€¦Â  Mommy will make it stopâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Glancing one last time at Sage and Rowen, she plunged the blade down.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  It slipped cleanly between two ribs and punctured the boy's heart.Â  He coughed once, blood trickling out the corner of his mouth, and smiled weakly.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Take itâ€¦Â  Iâ€¦ love youâ€¦ Momâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Then he lay still.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Kenjiâ€¦Â  Kenji!!"Â  Shara threw back her head and howled in pain.Â  Her son.Â  Her precious boy.Â  Dead.Â  Dead.Â  Slaughtered by her hands.Â  She grasped the sword even more tightly and began to turn it toward her own chest.Â  She deserved to die for what she had just done.Â  Any mother who kills her child deserves to die.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Suddenly a brilliant rush of light charged up the sword and flowed into Shara's hands.Â  It raced up her arms and filled her body with an iridescent energy.Â  Pure silver brilliance lit the entire room, causing everyone else in the room to shield their eyes.Â  Shara staggered to her feet, watching her hands turn transparent, and then solid once more.Â  The strange flickering traveled up her arms to her shoulders and then made its way down her body.Â  It filled her with power, with a sense of peace and serenity.Â  All traces of blood were erased from the katana in her right hand.Â  The glow began to solidify around her body, encasing it in brilliant silver Armor.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She lifted her head and stared across the room at Nephalia.Â  "Empress.Â  The time has come.Â  The Dynasty's reign of terror ends today."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Nephalia's eyes widened as she examined the shining Armor.Â  It was clearly silver, but it had a faint transparence that hinted at the shape of the delicate white skin underneath.Â  Stars seemed to glow from within the shimmering Armor, making her body shine with points of radiant light.Â Â  Form-fitting, high-heeled boots adorned her legs.Â  On her shoulders was a piece of silver cloth, a flowing cape of liquid mercury.Â  Instead of the typical samurai-style helmet, this Armor had an exquisite tiara that pressed against her forehead.Â  A luminous emerald sparkled from the center of the circlet.Â  Lines swirled away from the center, forming an intricate design that appeared to be representing the multitudes of stars and planets in the sky.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Whatâ€¦ what isâ€¦ that?" the Empress stammered, fear written across her haunting features.Â  "How didâ€¦ how did you get that?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara held her hand in front of her face and gazed at the lovely Armor, a gentle smile crossing her face as she did.Â  "It was a gift."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The Empress' eyes grew wide in surprise.Â  "Theâ€¦ the boy?Â Â Â Â  Â  He passed the Armorâ€¦ to you?Â  Through

his bloodâ€¦"Â  She clapped her hands together.Â  "Incredible!Â  I didn't know that was even possible!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The silver Ronin tilted her head and frowned, confused because of the Empress' sudden display of enthusiasm.Â  "Why are you so thrilled about that?Â  You do realize I'm going to use this to kill you, don't you?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The Empress threw back her head and laughed.Â  "No, my dear.Â  You will do no such thing.Â  Your heart is not pure.Â  Therefore, you cannot use the full power of the Armor of Creation.Â  Howeverâ€¦Â  You can be corrupted."Â  She raised one white hand and held it toward Shara.Â  A dark energy began to grow from the center of her palm, illuminating the sinister smile on the Empress' face.Â  "As your son became mine, so shall you.Â  Join me, Shara.Â  Become one with the darkness!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The ball of power launched from the evil woman's hand and flew toward the surprised girl.Â  She made a move to dive away, but it was too late.Â  The wicked energy was only inches away.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "No!"Â  A dark blue blur flashed in front of Shara and was struck by the Empress' attack.Â  He staggered back, convulsing as the dark power began to seep inside his body, distorting the pure light of his mind and soul.Â  The Ronin collapsed to the floor, his eyes sliding shut.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Rowen!"Â  Shara kneeled at his side and threw her arms around his still body.Â  "You big dummy!Â  Why'd you have to do that?" Â She laid her head on his shoulder, feeling the stinging sensation in her eyes that promised tears.Â  "Always trying to save me, even when you don't have toâ€¦Â  You jerkâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  His eyelashes fluttered open.Â  The Ronin's eyes were black and soulless once again.Â  Rowen's right arm lifted from the floor and his hand descended on Shara's neck, gripping it tightly in a chokehold.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She raised her eyes to meet his stony gaze and smiled softly.Â  "Don't, Rowenâ€¦ Pleaseâ€¦Â  Don'tâ€¦"Â  One hand floated up to caress his cheek; the other pushed against the floor and slid her body upward until her face was hovering inches above his.Â  "Let goâ€¦"Â  Slowly, tenderly, she lowered her lips to his in a loving kiss.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  His black eyes slipped shut; his hand fell from around her throat and settled at his side.Â  Suddenly, his arms were around her and he was returning her kiss with a burning passion that wouldn't be denied and couldn't be destroyed.Â  Not even by the Empress' magic.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Starting from where their lips met, brilliant silver light began to form around the duo as they continued to kiss.Â  It lit up the room with warmth and beauty.Â  It was a light of indescribable power, a light of purity, the light of love.Â  The glow surrounded them in a protective shell, shielding them from the darkness outside.Â  It was their own little cocoon where they could be safe together for all eternity if they wished it so.Â  And Rowen

certainly wanted it to be that way.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â _Oh, manâ€¦Â  I'm sorry I tried to kill you againâ€¦Â  _

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â That's okay, hon.Â  It's all over now.Â  You're back to your normal sweet self again, thanks toâ€¦ whatever this light is.Â  Some kind of weird power of my new Armor, I guess._

_Sharaâ€¦Â  Let's just stay here, okay?Â  It's a mess out thereâ€¦Â  I mean, as soon as you stop this, and get out of your Armor, all that grief will crash down around you again and you'll want to die.Â  Not to mention what Sage is gonna do if we disperse the shieldâ€¦Â  We both promised himâ€¦ and now look at us.Â  We can't stay away from each other, Shara.Â  It's going to ruin everything.Â  But as long as we stay here, it doesn't matter what anyone out there says.Â  We're safeâ€¦ we're together._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â I never knew you were such a coward, Rowen._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â I'm not!Â  I justâ€¦ have a healthy worry about what will happen if we go back._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Uh-huh.Â  Well, sorry, Rowen.Â  As enjoyable as this state is, it isn't real.Â  We can't just hide here and abandon the outside world.Â  The earth and its peoples need our power, the power of the Ronin Warriors.Â  I won't sacrifice the entire planet to Nephalia and the Dynasty just because ofâ€¦ your feelings for me._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â â€¦ My feelings for youâ€¦Â  You phrase it like you don't have any for me._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â I didn't say that!Â  Right now, all that's holding us in this place are your feelings, your desire to be alone with me.Â  If you let it go, we can return to reality and I can kill Nephalia and we can all go home!Â  Isn't that what you want?_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â â€¦ I don't have a home, Shara.Â  Sure, I have a decent apartment and a well-paying, though utterly pointless, job, butâ€¦Â  I don't have a home, or a life.Â  There's nothing but loneliness for me in the world outside.Â  Loneliness, and anger, and jealousy, and painâ€¦Â  Can't you understand why I'm not incredibly eager to return?Â  Can't you see why I'd rather just stay here in peace with you?_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Rowenâ€¦Â  Iâ€”_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â I mean, what can I do out there, Shara? Â I can save the world, but then I'm left to be miserable in it.Â  Maybe I just don't care any more about saving the bloody planetâ€¦Â  Maybe I just want to find happiness for myself, just onceâ€¦Â  Just one thing that will keep me alive during the roughest of timesâ€¦Â  A love to call my ownâ€¦_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Sometimes things aren't meant to be, Rowenâ€¦Â  Sage and Iâ€¦ I don't think there's anything that can tear

us apart.Â  Not even you.Â  Not evenâ€¦ the love we have for one another.Â  â€¦ And that is the problem, of course.Â  I _do _love youâ€¦ Â As much as I love Sage, perhapsâ€¦Â  And there's nothing I can do to change that.Â  But it won't do any good while it exists either.Â  All it will do is hurt us bothâ€¦Â  So, please.Â  Let's get out of here.Â  I want to be with my husband againâ€¦ to cry on his shoulder after this is all said and done.Â  I still want Sage, Rowen.Â  â€¦ I'm sorry._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  So am I._

The silver light began to diminish.Â  Soon Shara could push herself up and away from Rowen and stand on her own two feet once more.Â  Rowen stood behind her and placed a protective hand on her shoulder.Â  Annoyed, she shrugged him off and then glanced around until she spotted her husband standing several feet away, a dark, angry look on his handsome face.Â  The lovely blonde rushed over and embraced him tightly, burying her face in his strong shoulder.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Sageâ€¦Â  Forgive meâ€¦Â  I had to get Rowen back to normalâ€¦Â  And that was the first way that popped into my headâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He shook his head slightly, not raising his arms to return the hug.Â  "Sharâ€¦Â  I don't know what I'm going to do with you.Â  You're my wifeâ€¦ but you're constantly holding and kissing Rowen.Â  And just nowâ€¦ that lightâ€¦Â  Why do you two seem capable of doing such extraordinary things?Â  Whyâ€¦ not with meâ€¦?

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She sighed softly, bowing her head.Â  "Iâ€¦ I don't know.Â  It justâ€¦ happens.Â  But I do know one thing.Â  No matter what there may be between Rowen and me, it doesn't change how I feel about you.Â  You're my husband, Sage, and I love you more than anyone else.Â  Despite how it looks sometimes, my feelings for you will never dieâ€¦ never be cast aside for any reason.Â  If you don't believe my wordsâ€¦"Â  She lifted her chin and forced his eyes to meet hers.Â  "â€¦ Look into my eyes and tell me I'm lying."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Peering into her eyes, Sage could feel the truth of what she said.Â  Yet the ice in his chest refused to thaw.Â  When he looked at her, he knew his gaze was chilling.Â  "You may speak the truth, but it does not change reality.Â  Your actions are not the ones of a woman in love.Â  Anything but.Â  And actions are much stronger than words, Shara."Â  He slipped out of her embrace and coldly turned her to face Nephalia.Â  "But we can speak of this later.Â  Now you must fight."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She shivered at his icy touch, tears springing to her eyes.Â  Shara drew her sword, but couldn't seem to move to strike.Â  How could she fight now?Â  She couldn't even think straight.Â  Sage, who was always tolerant, always forgiving, had turned away from her.Â  Dismissed her in such a detached manner.Â  The anger had faded from his handsome face, leaving behind a stiff mask of disdain.Â  Shara turned to face him once more, hoping to see one flicker of affection in his eyes.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Sageâ€¦Â  Pleaseâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "No, Shara.Â  No more lies."Â  His voice hung heavy in the air, his words like icicles.Â  He curled his lips into a dark shadow of his usual smile.Â  She now disgusted him.Â  Those large, expressive eyes he had always loved now seemed utterly pathetic and full of deception.Â  Merely used as a tool to evoke sympathy.Â  As she began to turn away again, tears trailing down her cheeks, he leaned forward and brushed his lips against her ear.Â  His voice came out harsh and cruel.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "You disgust me, whore."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â A choked sob escaped her lips and she nearly fell.Â  Tears began to pour down her face in twin streams.Â  He hated her.Â  Utterly and totally.Â  A heavy weight settled on her back and she could stand straight under the pressure.Â  Her chest was blazing with a painful heat, as if red-hot needles were being forced into her heart.Â  His cold disdain wounded her more than a thousand lashes of a whip.Â  It was hard to breathe as her shoulders heaved with terrible sobs.Â  Her sword fell from her hand and clattered on the stone floor.Â  Her knees folded beneath her and she collapsed, all her strength gone.Â  The silver Armor vanished and she was left cold, naked, and alone.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Rowen grabbed Sage and slammed him against the wall.Â  "What are you doing?Â  How can you treat her like that?Â  I oughta kill you!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The blond man laughed.Â  "Go ahead.Â  I'm sure Shara would love having me gone.Â  Then you two could continue with your affair completely guilt-free.Â  But beware, Rowen.Â  She might start sleeping around on you as well."Â  His pale eyes were full of contempt:Â  contempt for his wife and contempt for his best friend.Â  He looked over Rowen's shoulder and called across the room.Â  "Hey, Ryo!Â  I'd watch Miaka closely if I were you.Â  Since Rowen doesn't seem capable of keeping his hands off other men's wives."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Ryo lifted one eyebrow in amusement.Â  Quickly, he turned and began speaking to the former Warlords in a quiet voice before striding over to join Sage and the others.Â  The three old Dynasty members turned to face Nephalia.Â  Kale and Sekhmet attacked the wicked Empress while Dais used the Ancient's staff to create a force field around the other Warriors.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Miaka stalked over and slapped Sage across the face.Â  Hard.Â  Her hand stung with needles as his cheek turned ruddy pink.Â  The redhead's full lips curved into a ruby sneer.Â  "Watch your mouth, Sage.Â  Don't talk about my best friend that way."Â  She whirled away from him and kneeled beside Shara, wrapping a comforting arm around the blonde's trembling shoulders.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Don't listen to him, sweetieâ€¦Â  You're not badâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Sage broke free of Rowen's grasp and stood beside his wife, a dark smirk twisting his mouth.Â  "Oh, no.Â  It's perfectly acceptable to cheat on your

husband."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Maybe if you weren't always gone, it wouldn't have happened!" Miaka snapped.Â "You were never there to support her!Â Your stupid training has always been more important than your own wife!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "I love her!Â She knew that, no matter how far away I was!Â But if just wasn't enough!Â She's a whore, Miaka!Â No matter how much I loved her!Â No matter how much I cared for her!Â Itâ€¦ it was justâ€¦ never enoughâ€¦"Â The ice in his eyes began to melt slightly as his voice lost some of its strength.Â "â€¦ I have responsibilities to this planetâ€¦Â I couldn'tâ€¦ just forget those.Â Even for loveâ€¦Â The future of Sharaâ€¦ of everyoneâ€¦ has always been my responsibility.Â I have to protect them.Â And the only way I can do that is through my training."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Miaka opened her mouth to say something, but she was interrupted by a tentative male voice.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "We all want to protect the ones we love, Sageâ€¦Â There's no fault in that.Â But don't let yourself become so afraid of the future that you lose sight of the present."Â Cye laid a comforting hand on his shoulder.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Kento nodded his agreement.Â "Yeah, man.Â The only good reason to fight is to protect what you love.Â But you go totally overboard!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Not saying this is all your fault, Sage."Â Ryo gave his friend a quick smile.Â "Rowen and Shara definitely deserve a huge majority of the blame.Â But just a tiny bit is reserved for you."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Sage didn't say a word.Â His eyes flitted from one Ronin to the next before settling on Rowen.Â The blue-haired Warrior met his gaze stonily, but a slight nervous tremor passed over his face.Â The two stood still, silently seething with jealousy and rage.Â The very air vibrated with the power of their anger, like invisible ocean waves of emotion rippling through the room.Â Their past friendship was completely forgotten in that intense moment.Â But then Rowen's stone mask crumbled and a hint of a smile crossed his face.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Hate me all you want, Sage.Â I probably deserve it all."Â He brushed a strand of dark hair out of his eyes and sighed.Â "I really haven't been that kind to you, old friend.Â Which is a pity because I think we're a lot alike.Â Sometimes it's almost as if we're the reflections of one another.Â I guess that'd make me the dark-half, huh?"Â Rowen shot a rueful glance at his friend.Â "I'm sorry that I've hurt you, dude.Â Never wanted to."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Sage looked torn as he lowered his gaze to the floor.Â He knew he should hate Rowen.Â Hate him for so many reasons, for so many things.Â But he was right.Â The two of them had always been best friends, almost as close as Cye and Kento.Â It was the first time Sage had ever heard Rowen utter that they were

reflections of one another, but it certainly wasn't the first time Sage had thought it.Â  Their minds worked in harmony a large portion of the time and it sometimes felt that they were merely extensions of one another.Â  Two versions of the same person on opposite sides of the mirror.Â  They had similar tastes, which was made painfully obvious by the love they both held for Shara.Â  As much as Sage wanted to despise Rowen, he simply couldn't.Â  It would be like hating himself.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  But he could never trust him again.Â  Walls had been formed between them that could never be completely destroyed.Â  Perhaps they could be friends, but their future relationship would only be a shadow of what it had been.Â  And for the good of the earth, they would have to reconcile to some extent.Â  Sage fixed his serious gaze on Rowen once again and nodded somewhat reluctantly.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Apology partially accepted.Â  In the interest of saving our world and in saving at least a part of our friendship, I'll attempt to be more cordial.Â  However.Â  Things will never be the same, Rowen.Â  Not between you and I, and not between Shara and I.Â  And hopefully not between you and Shara either.Â  There is no trust here any longer.Â  Both of you will have to earn my respect and regain your honor.Â  That will take quite some time.Â  But it's a better opportunity than either of you deserve."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Turning, he kneeled beside his weeping wife and took her hand in his.Â  "Shara.Â  I apologize.Â  I said things in anger that were improper and cruel.Â  No matter how hurt I am, I shouldn't lash out at you that way."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She lifted her face to meet his steady gaze.Â  "â€¦ Sage.Â  So youâ€¦ forgive me?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Not entirely.Â  But this is certainly neither the place nor the time to discuss this in full.Â  We need your help in defeating Nephalia currently.Â  We can talk this over at a later time."Â  He rose slowly, helping the trembling girl to stand on unsteady legs.Â  "Call your Armor back and finish this."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She shook her head.Â  "Iâ€¦ I don't know if I canâ€¦Â  I can't even think straightâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Dais let out a shout, interrupting the moment.Â  "Ronins!Â  I hate to interrupt your little soap opera, but you have to hurry!Â  My barrier won't last much longer, and neither will Kale and Sekhmet!"Â  He grimaced as another energy ball struck the shield of light he had constructed.Â  "Finish this now!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Sage nodded at him.Â  He then cupped Shara's chin in his palm and gave her a slight smile.Â  "You can do this.Â  If there's anything you are, it's a warrior.Â  Do it, Shara.Â  Do it for me, for Rowen, for Miakaâ€¦Â  For Kenji.Â  Have faith in your power, Shar."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Her eyes slid shut as she tried to concentrate on the power that burned quietly within her body.Â  It was hidden

deep under the pain and sorrow that made her chest ache, behind the feelings of emptiness and despair.Â  The shadows loomed on all sides of it, threatening to smother it in misery.Â  Yet it stubbornly grew stronger as she focused all her remaining energy on it.Â  Yet she somehow knew the power of her own spirit would not be enough.Â  Her emotions were too tumultuous, and her energy too weak.Â  The light in her chest began to fade away as she began to give up on ever being able to summon the Armor again.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Then a warm hand enclosed hers.Â  Tough and unyielding because of the Armor, but still gentle and caring.Â  Coolness enveloped Shara's other hand as slim fingers laced with hers.Â  Almost in unison, three other heavy hands clasped her shoulders with a squeeze.Â  And the soft rush of power that radiated from where her cheek was cradled still surged relentlessly.Â  Rowen.Â  Miaka.Â  Ryo, Cye, Kento.Â  And Sage.Â  All leanding their strength to her body, giving her the essence of life necessary.Â  The quiet glow within her began to grow with the additional sources of energy.Â  Shara tried to concentrate on the new flowing colors and direct them to where they were needed.Â  But the nagging doubt, her anguish, kept clouding her mind and disrupting her attempts.Â  She nearly wept from frustration.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  _Let it go, Shara.Â  We'll take care of our problems later._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Chill, chick.Â  Accept our power and let it flow.Â  Don't worry about Sage.Â  He's a butthead._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  You can do this!Â  With my fire helping out, how can you fail?_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  We trust you.Â  Kento and I are behind you all the way._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Hurry up!Â  I wanna go home and eat!_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  _She had to smile at the rush of warmth their words summoned from her heart.Â  But sadness still froze her thoughts.Â  One voice had not spoken.Â  The one that meant the most.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  After several moments of silence, one final statement broke free in her mind.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  _Love is your power, your gift.Â  Use it now._

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Her heart soared.Â  She focused her will on the pulsing energy that shone in her soul, directing the rivers of color to the heart of her Armor.Â  Emerald eyes flew open as a silver character flashed on her forehead.Â  The beautiful, complicated lines and curves of the kanji for "Love."Â  Piece by piece, her Armor reappeared, covering her bare skin with glittering material.Â  It hugged the curves of her body, flaunting its every detail. Â Clusters of stars formed over four of her body's _chakras, _glowing brighter than ever before.Â  The flowing cape appeared at her shoulder and cascaded nearly to the floor in quicksilver waves.Â  Metal flowed in

a stream from her palm and into the air, solidifying into a slim katana.Â  A brilliant green stone shimmered into view on her forehead, but this time her character was overlaid on the crystal.Â  Instead of the circlet ringing her head, an intricate helmet of silver curls and waves protected her.Â  Rectangles of metal that ended in sharp points were hanging from all sides of the upper portion of the helm.Â  She ran her fingertips lightly over the firm, shimmering Armor that clung like a second skin.Â  It was even more lovely than ever.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Kento flashed her a playful grin.Â  "Much better.Â  More Ronin, less Senshi.Â  Like a real champion of love and justice."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Ryo shook his head and laughed.Â  "Dude.Â  You watch way too much anime."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen explored the katana's blade delicately with is palm.Â  "Not bad.Â  Almost impaled my hand, though."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Miaka chuckled and gave Shara's hand a squeeze.Â  "You just picked the wrong hand to hold."Â  She enfolded her friend in a quick hug.Â  "You look awesome, girlie.Â  I knew you could do it."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara smiled in thanks before her eyes landed on Sage.Â  He had taken a step back and was simply watching as the other Warriors examined her Armor.Â  The expression on his face was flat and unreadable.Â  She gazed into his cool eyes, searching for any sign of any emotion.Â  He simply stared back for a moment, impassive, but then a faint smile of approval curved his lips.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Sageâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He shook his head firmly.Â  "No.Â  Not now.Â  There's work to be done.Â  Get to it."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Silently, she turned to face Nephalia.Â  The other Ronins took a few steps back, giving her all the room she needed.Â  Shara tightened her grasp on her blade and shot a daring smirk at the wicked Empress.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "You're going down."

---

**AN**:Â  Final chapter coming up, followed by an epilogue which will lead up to a special surprise.Â  ^_^Â  I really don't have much to say about this one, other than it's kind of sappy and sadly sweet.Â  If anyone is getting the feeling that Sage and Shara's relationship is mending too quickly, don't worry.Â  Things never stay calm for long when I'm aroundâ€¦Â

## 12. Rebirth

**Disclaimer**:Â  I don't own the Ronin Warriors or the Dynasty.Â

I'm merely borrowing them for the time being.Â  I'm not making any money off of this anywayâ€¦Â  So it's really not a big deal in the grand scheme of things.Â  However.Â  Like a mother protects her young, I will make sure Kenji, Shara, Miaka, Nephalia, Rime, and Eros are safe from the evil influence of wicked authors who would corrupt their perfect natures.Â  In other words, don't use my characters without my permission.Â  ^_^

Rebirth

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Nephalia glided across the floor, her hair trailing behind her like writhing snakes.Â  "I do not fear you, Ronin.Â  You cannot use the Armor's full power, remember?"Â  Her white legs flashed into view through the long slits of her robes with each step.Â  "You are nothing to me."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara closed her eyes and concentrated.Â  "Don't underestimate me.Â  I am the force of all the Ronin spirit energy."Â  She cut off briefly when another sudden rush of power filled her body.Â  Glancing over her shoulder, the blonde spotted the three Outer Ronins lending hertheir power as well.Â  As the new rivers of light bolstered her strength, Shara felt invincible.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She turned back to the Empress and smiled.Â  "Well, now I am, anyway.Â  You can't stop us.Â  No Dynasty member has ever been able to."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I am part of the highest level of power.Â  All those you have faced in the past were mere weaklings compared to me."Â  She lifted her hand and a ball of crackling black energy grew from her palm.Â  "My magic is without peer.Â  You shall learn to fear me, little girl."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Dream on."Â  A shield slid over her lower face and the silver Ronin leapt into battle.Â  Her blade flashed through the air like streaks of lightning, filling the air with blinding flashes of light.Â  But a strange deep violet barrier that enclosed the Empress deflected each strike.Â  As she landed lightly on the ground, Shara glanced up and saw the dark aura still flickering and sparking.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Nephalia extended her hand and casually examined her perfect black nails.Â  Her smile was calm and mocking.Â  "Is that all you've got?Â  I do not have time for such weak foolishness."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Definitely not.Â  Still got a few tricks in my bag."Â  Raising her other hand, Shara grinned as an energy ball identical to Nephalia's except for its silvery-gold color began to form there.Â  "You're not the only one with magic."Â  She hurled the flashing orb at Nephalia.Â  It struck the barrier and exploded in a burst of light.Â  The shield flickered and faded for an instant, but then reappeared as the same solid wall it had been.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Pathetic."Â  Nephalia launched the black energy at Shara.Â  The silver Ronin dove to the side, narrowly dodging the attack.Â  The Empress hurled orb after orb, trying to catch Shara with at least one of them.Â  Eventually her wish was

fulfilled.Â  The barrage came so quickly that Shara could not avoid them all.Â  A series of three attacks struck her in the shoulder, hip, and knee.Â  The blonde staggered and fell to one knee, pain racing through every nerve.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Nephalia moved closer, charging one final attack that would utterly destroy the silver Ronin.Â  She sent it flying toward the fallen Warrior's head, a triumphant smile curving her lips.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara reached for her blade, desperately swiping at the energy ball as it drew closer, trying to destroy it before it reached its target.Â  The silver katana streaked through the air and cleanly divided the sphere into two halves.Â  She started to cheer, but her celebration turned to horror as the two pieces merged once more and connected with their mark.Â  Shara barely had time to snap her head around and bow it slightly so that the magic only struck the top of her head.Â  Yet it still sent her crashing to the floor, on the brink of unconsciousness.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Shara!"Â  Rowen started forward, but Kale held him back.Â  He struggled against the Outer Ronin's grasp, desperate to save his suffering friend.Â  "She needs me!Â  Let me go!Â  I have to save her!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "No, Rowen," Kale said firmly.Â  "She must fight on her own.Â  Your interference would only cause problems.Â  Shara has grown weak since the time of Arcain's assault.Â  Fighting alone now is the only way for her to shed the skin of a coward and rise as the Warrior she was born to be."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I can't just leave her to die!"Â  The Ronin of Strata continued to try and break free of Kale's iron grip.Â  "I love her too much to just stand here and do
nothing!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Sage stepped in front of Rowen and gave him a cold glare.Â  "If you 'love' her, let her be.Â  Now and forever.Â  She needs to stand on her own."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Sage!Â  She's dying!Â  How can you say that?"Â  His blue eyes grew dark with rage as he returned the glare.Â  "Don't you care about her at all?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I love her more than you ever will.Â  More than even she knows.Â  But I understand her destiny.Â  Everything that has happened was fate, all of it leading to this moment when she leaves all of us behind and becomes something greater than we can imagine."Â  He turned and watched as his wife began to stand on shaky legs.Â  "We only hold her back, Rowen.Â  Release her heart so she can soar."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara staggered unsteadily, her ears ringing in the aftershock of Nephalia's attack.Â
> Gritting her teeth in pain, she lifted her head and met the evil woman's surprised gaze.Â  "That was supposed to get rid of me?Â  Didn't even hurt."Â  Her sword raised once more, the blade humming with power.Â  She took a step forward, ignoring the scream of her muscles, her eyes locked on Nephalia's.Â  "I've had enough.Â  Let's end this."<p>

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Gladly, child."Â She held out her hand and a saber of black light formed from her palm.Â "How about an old-fashioned sword fight?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara flashed a fearless grin.Â "Fine by me.Â I learned from the best."Â She advanced, holding her blade in front of her to test and see if the barrier still stood.Â After meeting no resistance, the blonde leapt to cover the remaining distance quickly and whipped her sword down toward the Empress' head.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Nephalia glided backwards to avoid the attack.Â Shara's blade slipped harmlessly past.Â She quickly swung her saber to strike the Ronin's sword from the side, knocking it off course and throwing her off balance.Â The Warrior landed awkwardly, but quickly regained her footing and struck again.Â Nephalia deflected it easily and countered with a swipe at Shara's right shoulder.Â She cursed as the blonde woman sidestepped skillfully.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara advanced with a series of lightning-quick strikes, trying to force the Dynasty's leader to retreat.Â But Nephalia blocked each and every one.Â The Ronin was stunned at her amazing speed.Â Shara continued her assault, but it seemed impossible to break through the defense of the Empress.Â And she was quickly tiring from the frantic attacking.Â That weakness caused her to swing carelessly, giving Nephalia the opening she had been waiting for.Â With a gleam in her eye, the Empress thrust her blade at Shara's stomach.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The silver Armor shattered.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara gazed blankly at the black blade protruding from her stomach.Â The edges of the wound sizzled as the flesh burned and stuck to the sword.Â Very little blood trickled from the wound because the blade instantly cauterized it.Â She watched the sword withdraw and toppled forward to the ground.Â Her eyes slide shut and all went dark.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "No!Â Shara!"Â Rowen strained against the arms that still held him.Â "Shara!Â Get up!Â You can't die!Â Nooooo!"Â He jerked back, bowing his head and pressing his palm to his forehead.Â "â€¦ You killed herâ€¦Â Let her dieâ€¦Â It's all your fault!"Â He lunged forward and seized Kale by the throat.Â "I'll kill you!Â You murdered her, you stupid son of aâ€”"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Sage pulled Rowen off the former Warlord.Â "Stop.Â It won't change anything.Â And have a little more faith.Â Shara won't die that easily."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Nephalia's laughter interrupted Strata's reply.Â "Are you mad?Â She is a _human_.Â She _can_ die.Â No matter what Armor or power she may possess, your beloved Shara is still mortal."Â The Empress walked toward them, holding her blade high.Â "I've killed your Angel, Ronins.Â Now it should be simple to finish off the rest of you."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Sage drew his sword and stepped forward.Â "Give it your best shot."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  One by one, the other Ronins joined him and the battle
began.

---

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Please.Â  Get up._

The soft, pleading voice stirred her and she slowly opened her eyes.Â  Darkness surrounded her, bleak and somber.Â  Shara settled back until she was kneeling and scanned her surroundings for the source of the voice.Â  She suddenly noticed that her bare skin was radiating a gentle white light.Â  It was frightening in the way it made her feel like a ghost, but also strangely soothing.Â  As she gazed into the black distance, a form of white light began to stride toward her.Â  As it drew near, she recognized the waves of blue hair and gentle teal eyes.Â  He was tall and leanly muscular, perfect in every way.Â  Like an angel descended from heaven.Â  But she knew better.Â  It was the face of an angel concealing the intentions of a devil.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  _Itâ€¦Â  It's youâ€¦Â
Ouji!_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  No.Â  No, Mother._Â  He reached out to her with one hand and brushed her cheek lightly.Â  _Ouji is no more.Â  All that is left is I.Â  Kenji._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  But youâ€¦ you look
likeâ€¦_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  That's because his form was an adult version of myself.Â  If I had been given the chance to grow up, it is how I would have appeared._Â  He offered her his hand.Â  _Come with me, Mother.Â  I will be your guide._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Whâ€¦ Where are we
going?_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  To where we belong._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Soâ€¦Â  I'm dead, huh?Â  I failedâ€¦Â  The guysâ€¦ Â I doomed themâ€¦Â  And all of Earth._Â  She took his hand, diamond tears forming in her eyes.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  _No, not at all.Â  This is all an illusion.Â  Your fear has drawn you here._Â  He pulled her up to her feet and placed his hands on her shoulders to steady her as she wobbled a bit off-balance.Â  _A fear so strong that it pulled you from reality and brought you here to me.Â  What are you so afraid
of?_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Iâ€¦ I'm not afraid of anything.Â  Ronins can't afford to be scared._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  You lie even to yourself.Â  Every mortal fears something.Â  What is troubling your mind the most,

Mother?_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Nothing!Â  I justâ€¦Â  _Her chin dropped to her chest.Â  _â€¦I'm going to lose them all, Kenjiâ€¦Â  I've already lost youâ€¦Â  And now they'll all be goneâ€¦_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Who are you afraid to lose?Â  Sage?Â  The entire planet?Â  Who, Mother?Â  What haunts you?_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  â€¦All of it.Â  It's all on my shouldersâ€¦Â  I'm the hero to this storyâ€¦Â  It's so much pressure!Â  I can't shoulder it all!Â  Why me?Â  Why is this all shoved on me?!_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The why doesn't matter.Â  Accept what is._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  But it could've been any of the other Ronins!Â  â€¦Why is fate picking on me?_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Why not you?Â  Do you think anyone would happily accept the burden you have been given?Â  Why should anyone have to carry such responsibility?Â  _He gazed at her for several moments, as if expecting a reply, before answering his own question.Â  _Because they must.Â  No other reason than that._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  But I don't _want_ itâ€¦_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  That doesn't matter.Â  You have no choice._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  But Iâ€”_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Enough, Mother.Â  Stop whining already.Â  As Kento would say, you're starting to sound like Usagi.Â  _He smiled, releasing her shoulders and taking a few steps back.Â  _Let go.Â  Let go of all your fear and terror and feelings of obligation.Â  Stop worrying about all the people you have to save and concentrate on yourself.Â  Let it be as if you are the only person in the world and you are merely fighting for your own survival, if the responsibility you carry is too great.Â  Think of no one but yourself._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  I can't do that!Â  _She looked horrified.Â  _Forget the ones I love?Â  How can you ask me to do such a thing?_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Then shut up and do your job.Â  Protect everyone, but do it by focusing on the battle you must fight.Â  Do not let your mind drift to what may come to pass.Â  Dwell in only the present.Â  _He flashed her a sweet smile.Â  _I know you can do it, Mother.Â  You just have to believe in yourself and in the strength of the bond between you and the others._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Kenjiâ€¦Â  _Shara gazed up at him, basking in the gentle love of his presence.Â  _I let you dieâ€¦Â  I _killed_

youâ€¦Â  How can you trust me?_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  It isn't hard to trust the person who gave you life.Â  _He chuckled softly and enfolded her in a warm embrace.Â  _I love you, Momâ€¦Â  Part of me wishes you could stay here with meâ€¦Â  But you have a job to finish.Â  And I can't be selfish._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  _She buried her face in his shoulder, holding him as tightly as she could.Â  _I wish you could come back with meâ€¦_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  _He pulled back a bit and brushed a tear from her pale cheek.Â  _Maybe someday, Motherâ€¦Â  Maybe somedayâ€¦Â  _Kenji planted a soft kiss on his mother's cheek.Â  _It's time for you to return to reality.Â  Be strong, Mother.Â  Show the Dynasty how tough you can really be._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Kenji!_Â  she cried as the scene began to fade.Â  _Stay with me!Â  I won't abandon you again!Â  I'm sorry!Â  _Her hands stretched toward him, but he only grew more distant from her.Â  _By all my power, I command you to return to me!_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  I am always with you, Mother.Â  Don't be afraid.Â  _His form grew faint as he retreated into the darkness.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  _No!Â  Live again, Kenji!Â  With the power of Creation, I demand it to be so!_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  _The ghostly shape of her son turned into a ball of golden energy and vanished from sight.Â  Shara bowed her head, saddened by her loss, yet knowing that somehow things would be made right once again.Â  Closing her eyes, she willed herself back to the life and fate she had to face.

---

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara opened her eyes.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  A battle raged around her.Â  The Ronins were relentlessly attacking the Dynasty's Empress, weapons and magic flying through the air like a savage thunderstorm.Â  Yet Nephalia simply stood within her barrier, laughing.Â  The eight still would not surrender.Â  Each was pounding on the wall that stood between them and their target, trying to destroy it in any way possible.Â  But nothing seemed strong enough to break through the aura.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara stood slowly, gazing at her stomach as the wound magically began to close.Â  Soon the bare skin was unblemished and smooth.Â  Her fingertips began to glow with a faint silver light that quickly raced up her arms and over her entire body until she was enveloped in a silver cocoon of light.Â  A strength she had never known before began to fill her soul.Â  All the fear and regret that had haunted her for years began to lift away.Â  Now she could see things as they truly were.Â  The world's fate rested on her shoulders, but that wasn't important.Â  All that mattered was this

moment, the moment where she would shine and save the only people in the world who counted.Â  Her friends and fellow Warriors.Â  They all shared the same duty; she was never alone, never could be alone.Â  And together there was nothing they couldn't overcome.Â  Smiling, the blonde tilted her face to the ceiling and called out in a gentle voice.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Armor of Creation!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The battle suddenly ceased.Â  Everyone turned to gape in amazement at the impossibly bright beauty standing before them.Â  Seven points of light shimmered on her body, one for each of the mystical _charkas_.Â  A being of enlightenment.Â  A Goddess of silver and white.Â  As the radiance faded, the nine stared at the slender girl's form and the gleaming silver skin covering her body.Â  It should've been impossible.Â  She should have been dead.Â  But there she stood, golden hair shining and emerald eyes glowing with power.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Sharaâ€¦" Rowen breathed.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Against his will, Sage's lips curved into a bright smile.Â  "Didn't I tell you not to count her out so quickly?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Nephalia's dark eyes were blazing.Â  "How?Â  This is impossible!Â  I killed you!"Â  She clutched her blade tighter and advanced toward the silver Ronin.Â  "No matter.Â  I'll end it now!Â  And this time I won't do you any favors!"Â  The Empress launched an orb of energy at the Warrior.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara watched it fly toward her, motionless.Â  At the last moment, she deflected it with her radiant sword.Â  Flashing a quick grin, she leapt forward, intending to skewer the wicked Empress.Â  But the barrier was not down.Â  Shara crashed into it and was thrown back by a violent backlash of energy.Â  She landed on her back and did a quick flip to return to her feet.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I told you I wouldn't do any favors," the Empress smirked.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara thought quickly.Â  There had to be some force strong enough to break through Nephalia's shield.Â  She considered using a large burst of her Armor's power, but feared that would weaken her to a point where she wouldn't stand a chance in the final confrontation.Â  Suddenly the perfect idea struck.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Ryo! Â All of you!Â  Together!Â  Now!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He stared blankly at her for a moment, obviously puzzled.Â  Then a flash of comprehension brightened his eyes and he gestured for the other Warriors to form around him in a loose chain.Â  The line shaped into a semicircle around Nephalia.Â  One by one, the Ronins called forth the power of their Armors.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Iron Rock Crusher!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Black Lightning Slash!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Snake Fang Strike!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Flare Up Now!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Web of Deception!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Super Wave Smasher!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Thunder Bolt Cut!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Arrow Shock Wave!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The eight attacks struck the shield at the same moment.Â  Shara prepared to charge forward the moment it fell, just in case the barrier's destruction would only be temporary.Â  The deep violet aura crackled and sizzled, flickering in and out of view before exploding in a shower of fragmented energy.Â  The Empress stood frozen, disbelief etched on her face.Â  That one moment of shock was all Shara needed.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Lunging forward, she raised her blade to the sky.Â  The air filled with white light that raced toward her sword, making it shine like the moon.Â  As each ray of light touched the katana, a star appeared on the glittering metal.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Nova Star Burst!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The brilliant light exploded from her blade and raced toward Nephalia.Â  The Empress raised her hands, trying to restore her shield in defense against it.Â  But there was nothing she could do.Â  It washed over her, coursing through every part of her body.Â  Her dark hair floated into the air and turned a milky white.Â  Rays of light burst from her eyes and mouth.Â  She screamed in anger and terror.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "This isn't over!Â  You'll pay for what you've done!Â  The past will come back to haunt you!Â  I swear I shall return again!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â A flash of black energy streaked from her head, swirled around in the air briefly, and plunged into the ground. Â The white iridescence surrounding her suddenly exploded into a shimmering shower of stardust, and the Empress was no more.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara landed lightly, a smile curving her lips.Â  "No, it is over, Nephalia.Â  You'll never hurt any of us again.Â  I hope you enjoy your stay in Yomi."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Then she was surrounded by her friends, all of them either hugging her or patting her on the back.Â  Shara smiled at each of them, laughing with sheer delight.Â  Everything was okay again.Â  The world would continue, would survive for another day.Â  But even in the midst of all her happiness, there were still dark

thoughts haunting her mind.Â  One was of Sage, and other of her lost child.Â  A deep sadness rushed through her as she thought of her son as she had last seen him.Â  She closed her eyes and tilted her face toward the ceiling, the celebration around her quickly fading from her mind.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  _You can make your wish come true, you know._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  _The voice echoed in her head once more.Â  But she didn't understand what was said.Â  _What wishâ€¦?_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The one rather similar to the wish you made seven years ago.Â  But now your Armor doesn't have to be completely sacrificed in order to grant it.Â  Just call out with your heart, using the power of Creation, and all shall be taken care of._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  It's that simple?_

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Yes.Â  No trouble at all._

_Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  _She smiled and folded her arms over her chest.Â  The other Warriors backed away quickly as silver-gold light began to fill the female Ronin.Â  They watched as a ball of golden energy descended from the ceiling and drifted toward Shara.Â  It floated in the air above her head like a small star before merging with her body.Â  She was temporarily encased in golden light, but it soon vanished.Â  Shara stood there for several moments, barely seeming to breathe, as the peaceful feeling filled her heart.Â  As she stood there, her Armor dissolved into the air, leaving the Ronin in a gown of silver silk.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen was the first one brave enough to step forward.Â  "â€¦ Shara?Â  You okay?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Her eyes slowly opened, the serene look still on her face.Â  "I'm better than okay, Rowenâ€¦Â  Everything is returning to how it should beâ€¦"Â  She pressed her hands to her stomach and laughed softly.Â  "Wishes do come true after allâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Sage's eyes narrowed as he stared at her, then flew wide as realization struck him.Â  "â€¦ Youâ€¦Â  Heâ€¦Â  You'reâ€¦?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She met his hopeful gaze.Â  "Yeah, Sageâ€¦Â  I am."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  The iciness in his face vanished instantly.Â  He rushed over to here and lifted her into the air, twirling her around in a circle and laughing happily.Â  "I can't believe it!Â  There's no way!Â  Youâ€¦Â  Our sonâ€¦"Â  He set her down on the ground once more, a troubled look flickering in his eyes.Â  "Wait a minuteâ€¦Â  He will be _ours_, right?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Her emerald eyes sparkled up at him.Â  "Of course he will be, Sage.Â  Of course he will."Â  She slipped her arms

around his waist and squeezed tightly.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Sharaâ€¦"Â He brushed his thumb across her cheek.Â A tender smile lit his face.Â "This is amazingâ€¦Â God, Sharâ€¦Â We're going to have a family
againâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She nodded, returning his smile.Â "And this time, I'll do it right.Â I'll protect him so the Dynasty will never be able to touch him.Â Our lives will be perfect, Sage.Â No more mistakes, no moreâ€¦ no more liesâ€¦Â I'll never hurt you again, Pachirri."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He chuckled at the nickname.Â "It's okay, Sharâ€¦Â I believe you."Â Sage cupped her cheek in his palm and dipped his head, pausing just centimeters from her lips so he could breathe a soft "I love you" before absorbing himself in a passionate kiss.

---

**AN**:Â Tada!Â And thus ends the magic tale of Shara and the other Ronins.Â Well, almost.Â As I was finishing up this chapter, I was approached by another author who wished to write a sequel to my story.Â Of course, this was amazing to me, not to mention flattering.Â I heartily agreed and she is currently finishing up her sequel, and next I think we shall be collaborating on a third part of the story.Â I promise that they will be even better than what I've already done.Â So stay tuned for new adventures of Sage, Rowen, Cye, Kento, Miaka, Ryo, and Shara.Â And maybe the Warlords will drop by for their obligatory scenes.Â ^_^Â

## 13. Epilogue

Disclaimer:Â â€¦ This is my final disclaimer to writeâ€¦Â *sniffles*Â Oh, I'm so deeply saddenedâ€¦Â I shall miss writing these soâ€¦ so muchâ€¦Â Waaaah!Â ~_^Â Anyway.Â For the last time.Â I do not own the Ronin Warriors.Â I have never owned them, and I never shall.Â Miaka, Shara, Kenji, Eros, Nephalia, and Rime are mine, and no one can take them without my permission.Â Thank you and have a nice day.Â ^_^

Epilogue

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "We really need to
talk."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Shara looked up from the TV in surprise.Â "What are you doing here?Â Sage might see you!"Â She stood and gave him a pleading look.Â "Go away, Rowen.Â Don't screw things up
againâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He bowed his head, shaking it slowly from side to side.Â "I'm not here to screw anything upâ€¦Â You and I just need to talk this all out so we can truly leave it behind us."Â Rowen flashed her a quick smile.Â "Just a few minutes, Shara.Â Please."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Sighing, she relented.Â The two went outside

and silently strolled down the path to the small garden behind the Date home.Â  They walked side-by-side for several moments without saying a word.Â  When they reached a wooden bench that overlooked the zen garden, Shara sat down on it and Rowen stood behind her.Â  They both gazed over the still water of a small pond and the many white flowers drifting on its surface.Â  After a long time, Rowen finally broke the silence.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I still love you, ya know."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She looked down at her hands and nodded.Â  "Yeahâ€¦ I know...Â  But there's nothingâ€”"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Nothing we can do about it.Â  I think you've made that perfectly clear on several occasions.Â  Still doesn't change how I feel."Â  Pausing, he rested on hand on her shoulder.Â  "Are you okay with that?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Do I have a choice?"Â  She leaned her cheek against the back of his hand and sighed.Â  "I know it hurtsâ€¦Â  I know that it isn't fairâ€¦Â  What we have is so powerful and soâ€¦ amazingâ€¦ that it just doesn't seem fair to let it go.Â  But what choice do we have, Rowen?Â  Sage is my husband and I love him dearlyâ€¦Â  There's just no room in my life for our relationshipâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Not even for a friendly one?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Not right now there isn't.Â  It still hurts too much to be around youâ€¦"Â  She closed her eyes, bitterness creeping into her voice.Â  "Apparently fate doomed us from the beginning.Â  And only fate will hand us the opportunity to be friends again."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I hope it will be soon."Â  He walked around the bench and seated himself beside her.Â  "I'll miss you, Sharaâ€¦Â  But no matter how long we're apart, I will always be here for you.Â  And I'll always love youâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She looked over at him, pained by the sadness in his beautiful eyes.Â  "Rowenâ€¦Â  I love you, tooâ€¦"Â  Her hand found its way over to his and slid up his arm.Â  "I wishâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He pressed a finger to her lips and smiled.Â  "Don't say that.Â  You could never survive without Sage.Â  We both know that."Â  He pulled her into his lap and ran his fingers through her long hair.Â  "Dream, but never wish.Â  You never know which idle desire might come true."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Her hand moved from his strong biceps to his firm chest.Â  "Trying your hand at philosophy now?"Â  She focused her eyes on his throat, afraid to look into his stormy eyes.Â  Her emotions were running wild; part of her wanted to run away while the other longed to take Rowen in her arms and kiss away all his fears.Â  "You're not that good at itâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Yeah.Â  I may be smart, but Cye is the

touchy-feely philosopher.Â  I'm just a regular, easily confused guy when it comes to emotions."Â  He brushed his lips across her forehead and smiled.Â  "Clumsy and flirty and vulnerable.Â  Makes me awfully endearing, doesn't it?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She laughed.Â  "You bet it does.Â  You irresistible sex god, tempting me with your cuteness."Â  The heavy mood that had settled over her broke and she lifted her gaze to meet his.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Blame it on the stars.Â  It's their fault I'm so good in bed."Â  His dark eyes glittered playfully.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Speaking of which.Â  Our birthdays are coming up pretty soon, aren't they?Â  What do you want?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "You to pop out of a cake.Â  Wearing nothing but a big bow around your scrumptious little neck."Â  When she gave him an incredulous look, he winked.Â  "Just kidding, of course.Â  I haven't really thought about it.Â  How about you?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Don't know."Â  Shara leaned her head on his shoulder and stared out at the wilting flowers as they floated carelessly on the pond.Â  "Think we'll get a party?Â  Ryo's birthday certainly was a lot of fun.Â  I still can't believe Miaka talked him into wearing a toga the entire night."Â  She giggled at the memory.Â  "He looked so cute!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Not as cute as she did in that skimpy thing she wore.Â  Wow.Â  I never realized Miaka was such a babe until that night."Â  He shook his head and grinned.Â  "What the heck was she wearing, anyway?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Some kind of mini-dress toga or something.Â  Didn't cover much at all, did it?Â  She's braver than I am.Â  I'd look awful in something like that!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Please," he scoffed.Â  "You'd look good wearing a pink plaid polyester pantsuit."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Eww!"Â  She smacked his arm.Â  "Don't even joke like that!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Chuckling, he gave her hand a squeeze.Â  "Hey, look.Â  We're acting like friends.Â  It's a miracle!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I know.Â  It's weird.Â  No angsty declarations of eternal love, no wild gropingâ€¦"Â  She thought for a moment and smiled.Â  "It's nice."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Yeah, it is."Â  His posture grew easy and relaxed.Â  He leaned back against the bench, letting one hand rest on her hip as the other continued to hold her hand.Â  She let her head fall back onto his shoulder and chest.Â  Her eyes drifted shut, a look of total peace on her face.Â  She looked so very lovely that his heart began to pound.Â  The desire to take her in his arms and make

her his again began to force its way into his mind.Â  At first it alarmed him, but then Rowen realized that it would always be there.Â  He just had to learn how to ignore it.Â  For the sake of their friendship.Â  That would be the only way to ensure she would continue to see him.Â  And maybe, just maybe, given enough time, patience, and possibly even livesâ€¦Â  Maybe someday they would be together.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Hey, Shara?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Mmmâ€¦?"Â  One eye cracked open lazily.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "This is going to sound kind of weirdâ€¦Â  Butâ€¦ canâ€¦ ummâ€¦ Can Iâ€¦?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She stroked the palm of his hand with her thumb.Â  "Can you what, hon?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He blushed.Â  "Can Iâ€¦ likeâ€¦ have oneâ€¦ lastâ€¦ kiss?Â  Just to finally put an end to this.Â  A note of finality that'll bring closure for us both.Â  Hey, it doesn't even have to be a sexy, passionate one.Â  I'd be happy with a quick peck on the cheek."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Her laugh was sweet and gentle.Â  "I don't suppose it would hurt anything.Â  As long as it's the last one.Â  And completely platonic, mind you."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Of course.Â  Wouldn't have it any other way."Â  He released his grasp on her hand, allowing her to turn and face him.Â  He watched as she raised her hand and brushed a wild wave of blue hair away from his eyes.Â  The skin underneath tingled with electricity from her touch.Â  Her green eyes were shining happily as she examined every line and plane of his face.Â  He could feel her hands running lightly over his shoulders and chest.Â  It sent a shiver up his spine, but he tried to push it away.Â  That's why he had asked her to kiss him; it would test his ability to hold back his passions, his desires.Â  If he succeeded now, Rowen would know he was strong enough to move on with his life.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She moved forward slightly, hesitantly, before lowering her lips to capture his.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  His pulse raced.Â  Her lips were soft, sweet.Â  Like the richness of a honeysuckle blossom.Â  He felt his arms rising to encircle her, to draw her close until he could feel her warm, voluptuous curves pressed against him.Â  Rowen struggled against the dark tide, forcing himself to keep their relationship friendly and light.Â  But as the kiss continued, his mind was thrown back to the first time they had been together like this.Â  The night they had both succumbed to the passion burning deep inside.Â  The day of their tragic
encounter.

---

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Hey, Shara.Â  Can we
talk?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She looked up from the dish she was washing.Â  "Oh, Rowen!Â  Hi, sweetie.Â  How's it goin'?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Can we talk?" he repeated softly.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Oh!Â  Sure!Â  Sorry.Â  Guess I didn't hear you the first time."Â  She put down the plate on a stack of clean dishes and wiped her hands on a dry towel.Â  The slender blonde walked around the counter and gestured for him to follow her into the living room.Â  As they settled on the red velvet couch, still stiff with newness, she patted his shoulder and smiled brightly.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "So.Â  What's on your mind?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He looked quite uncomfortable, tugging on a fold of the cloth on the arm of the sofa.Â  "Iâ€¦ummâ€¦ just thought I'd drop byâ€¦andâ€¦Â  You seeâ€¦ Iâ€¦ have to tell you somethingâ€¦Â  But I justâ€¦ I don't know how to say itâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She tilted her head, puzzled.Â  "What are you talking about, hon?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Do youâ€¦"Â  He swallowed nervously before continuing.Â  "Do you rememberâ€¦ the night of the battle against Arcain?Â  When you were running toward Sage as he reappeared and how I kept pulling you back?"Â  She nodded simply.Â  "Do you remember what I said at that time?Â  Right before you recognized Sage?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Shara shook her head slowly, obviously trying to think back to that horrific night.Â  "Noâ€¦Â  Things got really confusing at that moment.Â  None of it is very clear.Â  Why?Â  Was it something important?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Yes!Â  I mean, no!Â  Itâ€¦ it doesn't matterâ€¦Â  Not now, anyway."Â  His cheeks turned a light pink.Â  "â€¦ I don't even know why I'm hereâ€¦Â  Maybe I should just goâ€¦"Â  He moved to stand, his face turning redder every second.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Don't be silly."Â  She grabbed his hand and pulled him down on the couch again.Â  "If it's on your mind, and was strong enough to drag you all the way over here, it must be pretty important.Â  Now sit your butt down and tell me already!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He stared down at his hand, now clenched into fists.Â  "I can'tâ€¦Â  Don't worry, Shara.Â  It doesn't matter at all.Â  It's too late.Â  Too late for everything!"Â  He leapt to his feet and hurried toward the door.Â  He shook as his anger and sadness bubbled to the surface.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Rowen!"Â  Shara chased after him, grasping for his sleeve.Â  "Stop!Â  Why are you running from me?Â  Why can't you just tell me what's wrong?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "You want to know what's bothering me?Â What's been haunting my every thought?"Â His entire body was rocked with fine tremors.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Yes, Rowen!Â I'm your friend.Â You can tell me anything."Â She rubbed his arm comfortingly.Â "Just talk..."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He whirled around, his eyes dark with fury.Â "Fine!Â I'll tell you.Â Guess what, Shara, my sweet?Â My princess, my _tenshi_â€¦Â I am absolutely, totally, without a doubt, head-over-heels in love with you!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She took a step back, eyes wide in shock.Â "Roâ€¦ Rowen?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Yeah, Shara.Â I am.Â After Sage died and we started growing closer, I began to realize how much you really meant to me.Â It didn't take long for me to realize how deep those feelings ran.Â And seeing you with Sage only made it more clear.Â When I'm with you during the day, I relish in every word you utter.Â When we're apart, I dream about you.Â About us.Â Together.Â Some days I kick myself for not accepting your offer out by the lake that dayâ€¦Â Other times I wish Sage had never come backâ€¦Â But mostly I just wish that things could change.Â That you and I could live our lives side-by-side."Â He paused briefly, his voice trembling with emotion.Â "â€¦ But I know it won't happen.Â You and Sage are already married, right?Â Stillâ€¦ I can't help but wonder what it would be like to be with you.Â To hold you in my arms, and know that when I look into your eyes that you're only thinking of me.Â To be able to lie down beside you at night and just look at you.Â You're so beautiful, my _tenshi_.Â On the inside and out.Â Just once chance to learn what it feels like to love you would be enough to keep me happy for life."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She continued to stare at him, utterly speechless.Â "â€¦ Iâ€¦ I don'tâ€¦Â Rowenâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He spun on his heel, trying to fight back the urge to run away.Â "And now that I've made an utter fool of myself, I'll just goâ€¦"Â He opened the door and stepped across the threshold.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â A sudden tug on his arm stopped him in his tracks.Â Slowly, he turned to face the golden beauty behind him.Â Her thick black lashes sparkled with diamond tears.Â Her rose petal lips were parted slightly as if she were about to speak, but didn't quite know what to say.Â He gazed steadily at her, wanting her to speak, yet also fearing what she might say.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Rowenâ€¦ I didn't knowâ€¦Â Why didn't you say anything before?" she asked in a timid, soft voice.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "â€¦ Well, before Sage came back, I was afraid that if I made a move I'd be taking advantage of you and your grief.Â Set a limit of a year on my restraint.Â And just as it was almost up, he came back and there was nothing more I could do.Â My chance was up."Â He shrugged sadly.Â "After that, it just seemed

pointless to even think about it.Â  The 'love of your life' had returned; how could I compete?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She nodded, accepting that.Â  "Then why did you tell me now?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Plain selfishness, I guess.Â  I got tired of having it eat away at me and being the only one who suffered.Â  Guess I just wanted to share the fun of being an angsty teen," he said with a wry grin.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Understandable."Â  She sighed, brushing a stray tendril of hair from her eyes.Â  "Are you sure you're in love with me?Â  We're only sixteen, Rowen.Â  It's possible that you're just confused."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Do you know that you love Sage, Shara?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Of course I do."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "If _you_ can know you're in love, then so can I."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Alright, alrightâ€¦Â  Point taken."Â  She gazed at him sadly, her eyes full of confusion.Â  "I wish you hadn't told me, though.Â  I mean, it's completely useless!Â  You'll still be hurting, and now I'll be hurting, too.Â  You're my friend, Rowen.Â  Whatever pains you, pains me.Â  And telling you no would be one of the most painful things I could do.Â  You're my absolute best friend in the entire world, hon!Â  I trust you more than any of the others, more than the closest friends I have in school.Â  Even more than Miaka, and I tell her everything!Â  I never want to hurt youâ€¦Â  But now you've put me in the position where I have to.Â  There's no way I could ever leave Sageâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I already knew thatâ€¦Â  That's why it took me so long to say anything."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "That's right.Â  So why don't you just go home now and pretend none of this ever happened.Â  Forget all about any emotion you might think you have for me.Â  It'll only end up destroying us.Â  I just know itâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen caught her hand in his.Â  "No, Shara.Â  I can't do that.Â  I won't do that!Â  No matter what may come of it, I know what love is now.Â  Once you find something so miraculous, so powerfulâ€¦ it would be a crime to let it go.Â  Even if you don't return my feelings, my heart will always belong to you.Â  Whether you like it or not."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "You stubborn idiot!"Â  She yanked her hand free of his and grabbed him, shaking him.Â  "Don't talk like that!Â  It'll never happen!Â  And all this will do is screw things up!Â  You're going to ruin everything, Rowen!Â  My life, your lifeâ€¦Â  Absolutely everything!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He gently removed her hands from his shoulders, his head tilted slightly to the side.Â  "How can me loving you screw things up?Â  I don't plan on acting on it at all.Â  I just

really thought you deserved to know.Â  The only way anything could get messed up is if we did anything about itâ€¦"Â  Pausing, he quirked an eyebrow.Â  "â€¦ Or if you, in some form, returned my feelingsâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Her eyes grew a dark forest green.Â  "Returned them?Â  In your dreams, Rowen.Â  Totally hate to burst your bubble, sweetie, but I am devoted to my husband.Â  For eternity.Â  He's the only one I could ever love!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Devoted to your husband?"Â  The blue-haired Warrior laughed.Â  "Please!Â  You've been married for three months, Shara!Â  And of those three months, you've probably only spent three weeks of it together!Â  When you're off at school, he's at home.Â  When you get back, he's always off training.Â  As a matter of fact, hasn't he been gone on this training mission for the past month?Â  Gee, how devoted you two are to one another!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She slapped him.Â  "â€¦ How dare youâ€¦Â  How dare you come into my house and criticize my relationship!Â  It doesn't matter how long we're apart!Â  He has a job to do!Â  I understand that!Â  Love doesn't diminish with distanceâ€¦Â  I still care for him as much as ever.Â  And don't you forget that."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen touched his wounded cheek, slightly stunned.Â  "â€¦ Whatever you say, Sharaâ€¦Â  But you sure do change quicklyâ€¦Â  Why, just last week you were telling me how much it annoys you when he's away.Â  When he takes off and leaves you all alone in this big, empty house with nothing to doâ€¦Â  No one to take care of youâ€¦Â  And I don't mean to be cruel or hurtful, or convince you that Sage is evil or something.Â  He _is _one of my best friends, after all.Â  It's justâ€¦Â  I worry about you, _Tenshi_.Â  Hereâ€¦Â  Aloneâ€¦Â  With no one to keep you safeâ€¦Â  You're too precious to lose, Sharaâ€¦Â  I'd die if anything happened to you."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She reddened.Â  "Iâ€¦ I can take care of myself, Rowenâ€¦Â  And I was just in a bad mood that dayâ€¦Â  Didn't mean a word of thatâ€¦Â  Iâ€¦ It doesn't bother meâ€¦Â  It's his jobâ€¦Â  He has to trainâ€¦Â  For when the Dynasty comes backâ€¦Â  I mean, now that I can't fight, someone has to be strong enough to take any threat downâ€¦Â  I know he loves meâ€¦Â  He really doesâ€¦Â  Reallyâ€¦"Â  She turned away from him, balling her hands into fists.Â  A tear began to slip down her cheek and she swiped at it angrily.Â  Despite the cruelness of his words and the anger they inspired, she knew, deep in her heart, that they were true.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen stepped around her and enfolded her in a gentle hug.Â  "I suppose he doesâ€¦Â  Though I sometimes think he doesn't show it as much as he should.Â  And it's okay to be upset by his being gone, Shara.Â  Any wife would be.Â  Just know that I'm always here for you if you need someone to lean on.Â  Someone who will listen to you and understand.Â  And always at your side.Â  You'll never be alone, as long as I'm aroundâ€¦"Â  He pressed his face into her hair, his head nearly resting on her shoulder, and breathed in her sweet scent.Â  Like blooming jasmine:Â  exotic, enticing, and sultry.Â  The perfect perfume for a perfect girl.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Rowenâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Her breath ruffled his hair.Â He could feel her hands sliding up his back, returning his hug, pressing her body closer to his.Â Rowen moved his mouth over her shoulder and neck.Â His lips nuzzled her ear, the delicate skin of her temples.Â "I'll always be at your sideâ€¦Â Always here for youâ€¦Â Trust me, Sharaâ€¦Â Foreverâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â She sighed softly, raising one hand to tangle her fingers in his wild hair.Â It astounded her how just one simple touch from him had awakened such a cascade of emotions.Â It shouldn't be surprising that she did feel so strongly for him; Rowen was an incredible man.Â He was the most handsome of the Ronins, even surpassing her husband.Â His hair, like dark ocean waves, cried out to be stroked.Â His eyes, deep and endless like the midnight sky, were perfect for losing yourself in.Â And there was no way to describe his body.Â She spread her fingers across his back, feeling the hard lines of his muscles.Â Strong.Â Firm.Â Perfect.Â He loved her, and was completely unafraid of showing it.Â And, most importantly, he was _there_.Â Whenever she needed him, Rowen always came.Â He never left her side, holding her hand through the hard times, and laughing with her during the fun times.Â Maybe he was right.Â Maybe he was just what she needed.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He felt her pull away a bit.Â Her normally cool eyes were burning with passion.Â Yet there was still a spark of reluctance deep within them.Â But the Ronin was tired of playing it safe.Â Taking a deep breath, Rowen slipped one hand around the back of her neck and tentatively pressed his lips to hers.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â The moment their lips touched, it was as if it was meant to be.Â Sparks shot through her body from the top of her head to the tips of her toes.Â It was incredible; nothing like this had ever happened when she was with Sage.Â His body, his touchâ€¦ They brought an overwhelming feeling of heat to her body.Â Like flames licking at her flesh, slowly consuming her alive.Â Yet it wasn't at all painful.Â It was as if she were drowning in a river of fire.Â A blaze that promised nothing but pleasure.Â She tightened her arms around him, hungry for his touch.Â Aching to feel his skin pressed against hers.Â A nagging voice in the corner of her mind shrieked for her to stop, to remember Sage, but she frantically shoved it aside.Â The past, her husband:Â none of it mattered.Â All that was important was this moment.Â This miraculous, beautiful moment with this gorgeous boy whose touch was like magic.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He gently slipped his arms underneath her, cradling her soft body against him.Â He broke the kiss for a moment and gazed into her eyes, silently asking for permission.Â She appeared hesitant for a moment, but then she smiled and nodded.Â She laid her head on his shoulder, her fingertips stroking his strong chest.Â Rowen kissed her forehead lightly and carried her up the stairs.Â He pushed open the first door at the top of the staircase and closed the door behind them.Â Lowering her to the bed's crisp white sheets, he hovered above her, drinking in the beauty of her curvaceous figure.Â His hand ran over the buttons of her thin white blouse, and, almost absentmindedly, unfastened them as he moved down

her body.Â  The cloth parted, exposing the lily-white skin of her stomach.Â  He raced the slight indentation that ran the length of it, down to the button of her denim shorts.Â  He undid it quickly and slowly lowered the zipper.Â  When he tried to slide them off, she lifted her hips to make it a bit easier.Â  Rowen leaned back for a moment and simply stared at her nearly naked body, his heart filling with love and desire.Â  She truly was a _tenshi_, a beautiful angel descended from heaven to grace his life with her perfect love.Â  She was a delicate flower that seemed too fragile to touch.Â  But he didn't have that kind of restraint.Â  He needed her, needed to feel her warm skin under his hands, her soft lips caressing his body.Â  The blue-haired Ronin quickly took off his own clothes and slipped under the sheets beside her.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She turned to face him, pulling the covers over her body as she did.Â  Her shirt slid from her shoulders and lay behind her in a puddle of white satin.Â  She ran her hands over his firm muscles, exploring his entire body and marveling at its strength.Â  He was even more incredible than she had imagined.Â  His stormy blue eyes caught her gaze and she drowned in the fiery passion that burned within them.Â  He reached aroundÂ  her to unclasp her bra.Â  After several moments of fumbling and cursing, she laughed and gave him a helping hand.Â  Feeling a little embarrassed, Rowen hurriedly slid off all of her undergarments, and then pulled her body completely against him.Â  She melted into his arms, her eyes fluttering shut as she relished in the thrill of pressing skin-to-skin.Â  He lay still in her embrace for several minutes before she felt a subtle change in his breathing and he began to move.Â  He strong hands roamed over her body, seeking out the most secret places.Â  Each touch of his hands, of his lips, filled her with a pleasure she had never known before.Â  Cool lips soothed the fever gathering in her breast.Â  Every caress, every kiss was soft and gentle.Â  But Shara could feel something building between them.Â  A growing passion, barely suppressed, that longed to be unleashed.Â  It was there in his hands as he rubbed her lower back, in his lips as they moved over her neck and shoulders.Â  Finally it became too much for her to bear and she rolled Rowen onto his back.

He gazed up at her in surprise.Â  Her eyes were smoky and dark, smoldering with fierce desire.Â  She grabbed his hands in hers and held them tightly, kissing and caressing each finger with her tongue.Â  Then she guided his hands over her lovely figure, showing him precisely what to do and where to touch if he wanted to give her the most pleasure.Â  He felt her grasp loosen and his arms fell at his sides.Â  She raised up and slid backwards along his body until her leg straddled his hips.Â  Then she began to rock back and forth, slowly at first, but with steadily increasing speed.Â  Reaching up, he grasped her hands, lacing his fingers with hers.Â  He began to move his hips in rhythm with hers; every time she slid forward, he thrust up to meet her.Â Â  They continued like this for several minutes, their passions and excitement growing more amazing with every passing second.Â  At last, they both gasped out a deep moan, and then it was over.

She collapsed on his chest, trying to catch her breath.Â  His arms wrapped around her body, fingertips caressing her damp skin.Â  He lay still for quite a while, listening as her breath and heartbeat slowed.Â  Finally, he brushed a kiss across her forehead and smiled.

"You were amazing, _Tenshi_â€¦"

She lifted her head.Â  Dark sky and deep forest met as she flashed him a wicked grin.Â  "I'm not finished with you yet, _Koishii_â€¦"

And they started all over again.Â  Bodies entwined, trying a million different ways to bring fulfillment to one another, finding ecstasy in each other.Â  It continued far into the night, until both were too exhausted to move any
more.

---

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen awoke the next morning and stretched, his mouth gaping open in a tired yawn.Â  Scratching his head, he glanced down at the pillow beside him, expecting to see Shara's golden head.Â  But the space was empty.Â  His eyes darted around the room, searching for his angel.Â  There she was.Â  Sitting in a chair by the window, her knees drawn up to her chin and her arms wrapped around her legs.Â  Sunlight streamed through the panes of glass, making her white skin shimmer with golden tones.Â  A halo of light surrounded her body, and a smile crossed his face.Â  Now she really did look like an angel.Â  Yet there was something wrong.Â  Her face was streaked with tears, and her eyes were dark and lusterless.Â  Standing, he crossed the room and kneeled at her side, running his lips along her shoulder and upper arm.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "What's the matter, gorgeous?Â  You look so sadâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She didn't even look at him.Â  "Why shouldn't I be?Â  Aren't you?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "What?Â  Sad?Â  No way!Â  I'm still high from last night."Â  He tried to take her hands, but she yanked them away.Â  "â€¦ Why do you feel so terrible?Â  What's
wrong?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "â€¦ Everythingâ€¦ I screwed up so badlyâ€¦"Â  Her head dropped to her knees.Â  "I'm such an
idiotâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He caressed her thigh, blue eyes shining.Â  "You are not.Â  You were absolutely perfect, Shara.Â  Don't worry about that at all."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She stood suddenly, knocking him back, and shot him a deadly glare.Â  "Not _that_, you moron!Â  God!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen looked wounded.Â  "â€¦ Shara?Â  Did Iâ€¦ Did I do something wrong?Â  Why are you so angry with
me?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "You really don't get it, do you?" she snapped.Â  "Do you have any idea how very stupid what we did is?Â  Any clue at all how horribly this is going to screw up our lives?Â  Iâ€¦ I _cheated_ on my husband, Rowen!Â  The man I love with all my heart!Â  I'll never be able to face him!Â  Not now!Â  Notâ€¦ not

after thisâ€¦"Â  Her hands clenched into fists.Â  "â€¦ Why did I let myself go like thatâ€¦?Â  Godâ€¦Â  I want to dieâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Sharaâ€¦"Â  He reached out to embrace her.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  She shoved him away.Â  "Don't touch me!Â  Ever!Â  Get out of my house and never come back!Â  I hate you!"Â  The blonde girl scooped his boxers from the floor and hurled them at his face.Â  "Go!Â  I don't want to see you ever again!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Butâ€¦ but I love you, Sharaâ€¦Â  I justâ€¦ I didn't mean toâ€¦"Â  Tears gathered in his dark eyes.Â  "Pleaseâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "No, Rowenâ€¦Â  It's over.Â  No matter how much you may love meâ€¦Â  We can never talk of this.Â  As far as I'm concerned, it never happened.Â  Forget it, Rowen.Â  Please.Â  Now justâ€¦ just go."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  He tried once more to touch her, but she turned away from him.Â  Tearfully, the blue-haired Ronin gathered his things, dressed silently, and left.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Alone with her own misery, the beautiful blonde sank to her knees and wept.

---

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "I should've known you wouldn't change."

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen jerked his head back, breaking out of his reminiscing and out of the kiss.Â  Shara's eyes flew open and she stared over Strata's shoulder.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Oh, Godâ€¦"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Piercing blue eyes burned coldly into hers.Â  "You had me utterly convinced that I could trust you.Â  Now, here you are, back to your old tricks.Â  No more, Shara.Â  Go to the house, pack your things, and get the hell out of here.Â  I don't' care where you go or what you do.Â  Just stay away from me."Â  He turned and strode back toward the house.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  "Sage!Â  No!Â  It isn'tâ€¦Â  It isn't what you think!"Â  She leapt from Rowen's lap, chasing after her husband.Â  "Please don't do this!Â  Talk to me!Â  Sage!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â  Rowen sat still, listening to her voice fade as she moved farther and farther away.Â  He felt absolutely terrible.Â  Yet again he had lost control.Â  But this timeâ€¦Â  This time he feared things between he and Shara were forever severed.Â  The Ronin slumped in his seat as a dark orange leaf drifted into his lap from the tree above.Â  The brittle leaf crumbled into dust when he touched it, and he chuckled darkly.Â  How very fitting it seemed.Â  Everything he touched was

destroyed.

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Rowen!Â Rowen!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â He glanced up to see an auburn-haired man dashing toward him, panic written on his face.Â "Cye?Â What's up, man?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Where have you been?Â I tried to call both you and Sage!Â No one would answer the phone!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "I've been here.Â Sageâ€¦Â Well, he just got home.Â Why?Â What's wrong now?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Kentoâ€¦Â He'sâ€¦Â he's fighting some kind ofâ€¦ of demon thingsâ€¦Â Back at our house.Â Thankfully, Ryo was over for a visit, so he's helping outâ€¦Â Butâ€¦Â I don't know _what_ these things are.Â Never seen anything like itâ€¦"Â Torrent clutched Rowen's arm.Â "We have to get Sage and hurry back!Â We have to save Kento!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "What?"Â He jumped up, eyes flashing.Â "An attack?Â Don't these Dynasty guys _ever_ take a break?"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Iâ€¦ I don't think these things are from the Dynasty.Â They lookâ€¦ they look like they come from the pits of Yomi itself!Â But there's no time for this!"

Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â Â "Right.Â Get Sage.Â I'll go fight." Â He ran past Torrent and started toward the house that Kento and Cye called theirs, nearly two miles away.Â _I wish we'd get to rest for more than two days!Â Agh!_Â He quickly called on his Armor and continued running.Â _I _so_ need a vacation._

---

**AN:Â **Okay, now that I've screwed up Shara and Sage's relationship again and started a battle, I'm all finished!Â Now it's time to let someone else take over the reins for me.Â *salutes*Â Do me proud, hon.Â ^_^Â For the record, I'll probably write some more sequels laterâ€¦Â But for now I think I'll just get started on rewriting the first chapter of this story, and extend the prologue into a full-fledged storyâ€¦Â Lots of work ahead of me.Â

End file.